

PRINCEfocus



This section of the magazine, supported by APM Group, brings you news and views on the continuing development of PRINCE2 and Managing Successful Programmes.

Making the case for programme management

By Rod Sowden, Aspire Europe Ltd



Just as project management was the challenge for the 90's it seems that Programme Management is the challenge for the Millennium. This is hardly surprising because the development and adoption of project management best practice, be it the Prince2 public domain or in-house method, has generally raised the quality and awareness of project delivery and expectations about the benefits. But organisations, having improved their project delivery, are now coming to terms with the consequences.

Many people now work in organisations where everything has become a project, whether it be a new building, an office move, an IT development, implementing a new business process, or simply renumbering the parking bays in the car park!

I will happily hold up my hand here and say that I think this is the right way to do things: structured change, with clear objectives, management of risk, timescale and benefits provides organisations with a degree of control and certainty in rapidly changing environments and ensures focus and delivery is maintained along with

accountability.

If there is no structure to monitor, control and schedule your projects, you can easily end up with dozens of wonderfully well run projects delivering a vast array of deliverables and capabilities, happily gobbling up operational and project resources as they progress in their fully authorised and structured way.

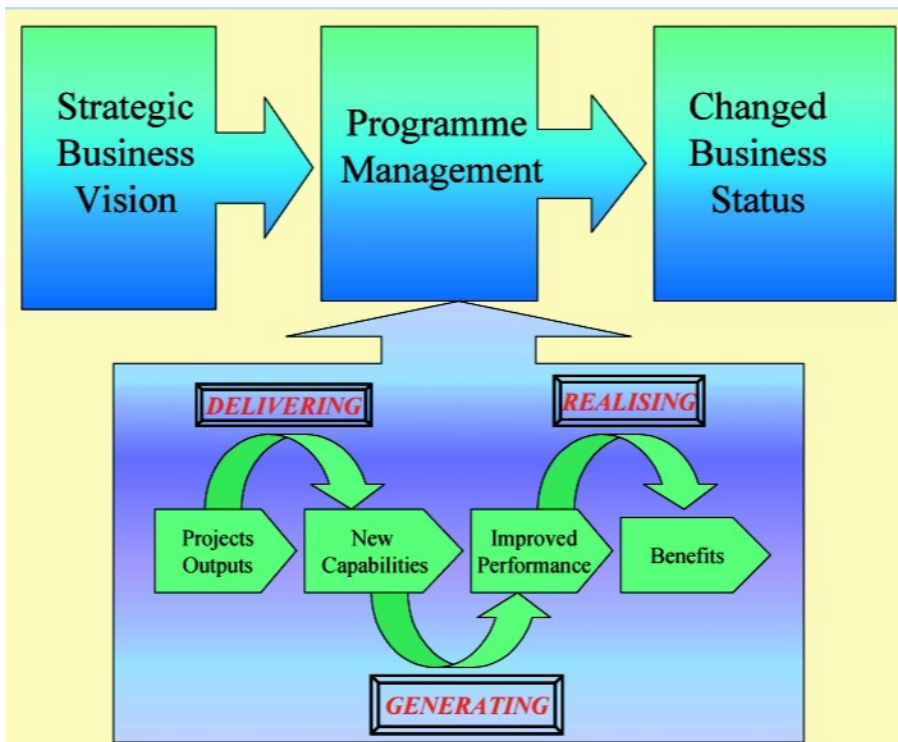
The problem here is that projects operate in silo's, they are by nature focused, constrained by their brief and to be quite frank, not that focused on the 'bigger picture'. It's all about delivery to the holy trinity (time, cost and quality). Who is making sure the benefits are delivered?

A bigger problem for organisations is maintaining a clear link between the strategic vision and how the projects that are delivering the capabilities will enable the achievement of strategic benefits. Time, then, for organisations to consider Programme Management but do people understand what this involves?.

Programme Management should be the mechanism that turns the strategic vision into reality. It is the link between projects and the 'bigger picture'. Unfortunately in many organizations Programme Management simply seems to have been adopted as a means of bringing of order to a project delivery environment

Strategy, benefits and blueprint are the key words for effectively putting programme management into context. But few organisations fully grasp this point. They view the programme manager as a kind of enforcement agency for project delivery, rather than seeing him or her as the custodian of the organisation blueprint; in many cases Programme Management is a rebadged Project Support Office.

So what are the key questions that can be asked of an organisation to test whether it has adopted Programme Management as a project control mechanism or as a strategic enabler?



1. Who does the Programme Manager directly report directly to?

If it isn't a director or senior manager, it is possible that the term Programme Manager is being used where Senior Project Manager may be more appropriate.

2. Is there a Strategic Vision for the Programme?

If there isn't, how does the programme link into the corporate vision and strategy? Without one, will the objectives and benefits that the programme is designed to deliver have been really thought through, because if they haven't it will fail.

3. How importantly is the delivery of benefits rated ? Unlike a project, a programme should be around to see the benefits delivered into the organisation, rather than just capabilities. If there are no processes that track benefits achievement after projects complete, which monitors operational KPI's for the savings and efficiencies, and defines clear ownership for delivering the improvements, then one would have to question whether you actually have a programme.

4. Are there success measures for the programme?

Is it simply a process for checking project progress and reviewing highlight reports, or is it actively contributing to and adjusting the strategic blueprint for the organisation and initiating the projects to achieve that blueprint.

5. Who are the stakeholders for the programme?

If they aren't directors or senior managers, and there isn't a structured communications plan to maintain their commitment and ensure they are engaged with the delivery, then there should be. Does the managing director or CEO see the programme reports ?

If you have more 'no' than 'yes' answers, there is no need to panic, it just helps to illustrate my point that programme management is still an immature concept and has become jargon for management of a project environment or a portfolio project manager.

Programme management is not project management for grown ups. I would argue that it is something different. Its focus is to deliver the strategy, and engage with internal and external stakeholders as an equal if not higher priority than assuring project delivery. The tools, techniques and skills are different.

For people who are new to the term, or have landed a role and are now realising that things aren't quite as straightforward as they expected, don't worry, we've all been there. We would recommend however, that you have a look at the OGC (Office of Government Commerce) publication called 'Managing Successful Programmes'; it is the programme management equivalent of Prince2, but is far less prescriptive. This is helpful, as two programmes are never the same.

The competency and experience for a programme manager should be more than a track record of delivering projects; there must also be an understanding of the operational needs and the broader impact of change.

The programme manager should be a skilled manager who will empathise with and effectively handle the variety of cultural and business challenges and demands that are present in any major programme.

I hope that this article has shed some light onto the shady area of programme management and at least open up some of the issues for debate. In my view, programme management is undoubtedly the way forward for organisations wanting to align their business strategy to business reality, just as projects are recognised as effective vehicles for achieving change, programme management is the vehicle for linking that change to the vision.

However, as with project management in the 90's, until the inconsistencies are recognised and addressed through common standards, language, and practices, misunderstanding will continue.

This is why I am a strong advocate of MSP, and, though the first version had its limitations, it does provide a strong foundation to build good programme management delivery. There is no doubt that the new version will further enhance its standing in the profession.

Apire³ is a global consultancy specialising in delivering MSP based change programmes

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