Roles, responsibilities, and skills in program management

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a significant increase in project and program management maturity, largely with thanks to the efforts of the various project management institutes and associations worldwide.

More importantly in the context of this paper, program management as opposed to project management, varies not in scale but rather in the fundamental management aspects that have been well developed and defined over the past decade. A major milestone in such an understanding was the publication of *Managing Successful Programs* (Office of Government Commerce [OGC], (2007). Here, program management was defined as "the action of carrying out the coordinated organisation, direction and implementation of a dossier of projects and transformation activities to achieve outcomes and realise benefits of strategic importance to the business". It clearly outlines the role of the business change manager that constitutes the greatest difference between the roles found in project management and in program management.

Today, some confusion still exists over the roles of the different actors in program management and their peers in project management. This paper tries to outline and clarify the major roles, their responsibilities, and the skills required to satisfy such responsibilities.

Definitions

Job

A job is a position within an organization and is usually defined in the job description, which outlines what is expected from the person who

will perform such a job and his/her skills and attribute. Examples of jobs are marketing director, software developer, executive assistant, etc.

Role

Within each job, there is at least one role to assume. In project and program management, there are often multiple roles associated with each job, depending on the needs and phase within the program life cycle. Typical roles in program management are program manager, planning coordinator, senior user, etc.

Responsibilities

For every role assumed, there is a set of associated responsibilities. However, not all associated responsibilities need to be satisfied on every occasion. Required responsibilities vary depending on the type of initiative and the point of time within the program's life cycle. Examples of responsibilities are quality control, management reporting, risk planning, etc.

Skills and Attributes

In order to satisfactorily fulfill a responsibility, a skill or a set of skills are required. Skills are usually acquired through training, experience, or a combination of both. Examples of skills are: communication, planning, and leadership.

Sometimes, certain attributes are needed to help in the effective utilization of skills. Such attributes could also be acquired through training and experience. However, these can be personal attributes that were embedded in us during our early stages of development. Examples of attributes relating to these skills are: confidence, logical thinking and charisma.

It is important to understand the relationship between a job, the role(s) involved, the responsibilities held, and the skills required to satisfy the

job. Without a clear understanding of these, it is unlikely that an efficient program management team can be put together

Roles, Responsibilities, and Skills

A program, regardless of its structure, purpose, or outcome will entail a project or a number of projects (or a mix of projects and other programs). That is to say, projects by default are present in every program and as such, certain project management roles must be present within every program. Such roles include the project manager, customer, senior user, planning coordinator, etc. In this paper, we will concentrate on the major roles within a program that differ from those of project management; primarily, we address what is referred to as the program board by *Managing Successful Programs* (OGC, 2007).

The Sponsor

The sponsor is the most senior member of the program organization. Often in large programs, there is more than one sponsor or sponsoring group. The sponsor has some crucial responsibilities, some of which are often ignored to the detriment of the program. Ironically, seniority is often the reason they are ignored.

Responsibilities of the sponsor

- Authorizing the program on the basis of its mandate and business case;
- Appointing the senior responsible owner (SRO) to represent the interest of the sponsor;
- Approving and authorizing the funding for the program;
- Resolving cross-program issues and strategic issues with senior stakeholders;
- Approving the program's progress against the organizational strategy and objectives;
- Demonstrating "visible" support to the program and its management team;

- "Leading by example" the transformational change brought about by the program; and

- Confirming successful delivery and signs-of at the program closure.

Skills and attributes of the sponsor

By virtue of his or her position, the sponsor is a very senior member of the organization. He or she should have a clear vision of the strategy, very strong entrepreneurial skills, high credibility in the organization, and a deep knowledge of the business.

The Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)

The SRO is often the sponsor or a member of the sponsoring group. He or she is appointed by the sponsors to represent them in the program organization and is ultimately responsible for foreseeing that the program meets its overall objectives. The SRO must be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the sponsors.

Responsibilities of the SRO

- Guarding the viability of the vision and the business case;

- Getting the money from the sponsors;

- Leading the program to its successful completion;

- Managing key "strategic" risks;

- Maintaining strategic alignment between the program and the organization; and

- Interfacing with the senior stakeholders.

Skills and attributes of the SRO

Just like the sponsor, the SRO is a senior member of the organization. He or she must possess strong leadership skills and be able to make critical decisions. The SRO should be able to retain focus over the strategic objectives of the program.

The Program Manager

The program manager can be thought of as a "super" project manager. His or her role is mainly operational since this person is responsible for planning and governance and for overseeing the successful delivery of the program's output/product. That is, the new capability.

Although knowledge of the business is important, there is more stress on his or her program management skills. The program manager must have practical experience of having been a project manger for large and complex initiatives.

Responsibilities of the program manager

- Daily program management throughout the program life cycle;

- Defining the program governance (controls);

- Planning the overall program and monitoring the progress;

- Managing the program's budget;

- Managing risks and issues and taking corrective measurements;

- Coordinating the projects and their interdependencies;

- Managing and utilizing resources across projects;

- Managing stakeholders' communication;

- Aligning the deliverables (outputs) to the program's "outcome" with the aid of the business change manager; and

- Managing the main program documentations such as the program initiation document.

Skills and attributes of the program manager

The program manager must have strong practical experience in project management, which was gained through managing large and complex projects. He or she must have the following:

- Good knowledge and handling of project and program management methodology and techniques;

- Good understanding of the wider objectives of the program;

- Ability to work positively with the wide range of individuals involved in program management;

- Strong leadership and management skills;

- Good knowledge of budgeting and resource allocation procedures; and

- The ability to find innovative ways to resolve problems.

The Business Change Manager (BCM)

One of the fundamental differences between program management and project management lies in the management and realization of the benefits. That is, the clear and measurable added value brought about by the integration and utilization of the newly delivered capability.

Whereas project management deals with outputs (products or deliverables), program management deals with outcomes, the final result brought about through the utilization of such outputs.

The role of the BCM is that of planning and managing the realization of the benefits through the integration of the new capability within the business practices. The BCM is a strong member of the "business," and although knowledge of program management is very helpful, the higher emphasis is on his or her knowledge of the business processes and the organization's strategic objectives.

Where there may be more than one business area impacted by the program, a BCM for each of these areas should be appointed, one of which will act as the senior BCM.

Responsibilities of the business change manager

- Defining the benefits that will realize the strategic objectives of the program;

- Developing the benefit realization plan;

- Maintaining overall focus on benefit realization;

- Defining and tracking the key performance indicators for benefit realization;

- Managing "business continuity" during the change;

- Advising the program manager on whether the outputs and outcomes will lead to the realization of the benefits;

- Preparing affected business areas for transition to the new way of working. Potentially implementing new business processes; and

- Optimizing the timing of the release of new deliverables into business operations.

Skills and attributes of the business change manager

The BCM must have a strong background and ongoing operational responsibilities in the relevant business areas affected by the program. He or she should have a good understanding of the management structure, politics, and culture of the organization, and possess good change management skills and enough experience to manage very complex situations while maintaining focus on the program's objectives. The BCM should also have good negotiation skills, interpersonal skills, chaos management skills, and prioritization skills.

The Program Management Office (PMO)

The program management office has similar functions to the project management office but on a larger scale, higher level, and a wider perspective.

The PMO can vary from one person acting as "program support" to a large team of individuals and can have more than one location if the program is scattered nationally or globally. It can be setup to support a specific program or be a permanent structure supporting all the organization's programs, in which case, it is integrated with the organization's permanent project management office. The PMO has a manager responsible for its functions: the program office manager.

Responsibilities of the program management office

- Setting up tools and standards for managing the program;

- Planning, tracking, and reporting on outputs and outcomes;

- Information and logistics management;

- Financial planning and tracking ;

- Risk and Issue tracking;

- Cross-project interdependency management;

- Setting quality control standards and tracking implementation;

- Setting and tracking change control procedures;

- Developing stakeholders' map, defining the interest of each group; and

- Planning and executing communication plans to stakeholders.

Additional roles that a permanent PMO can have

- Strategic overview and reporting on all programs to senior management;

- In-house consultancy to projects and programs;

- Providing training to projects and programs management teams; and

- Auditing and health checks on projects and programs.

Skills and attributes of the program office manager (POM)

The skills required for the role of the program office manager are very different from those of the program manager. The program manager role is a hands-on role and requires strong leadership and people skills. On the other hand, the POM's role is a hands-off role requiring strong management discipline and communication skills. The POM's role is a supporting role to the program and its management team.

The skills and attributes of the POM should include:

- Long experience of effective program management. Having been a strong member of program management team(s);

- Solid proficiency in program and project management methodologies;

- Strong knowledge and experience in the use of the various tools to aid program management;

- Ability to put theory in practice;

- Clarity during chaos; and

- Strong interpersonal and communication skills.

Exhibit 1: Senior Responsible Owner and the Program Board (OGC, MSP© 2007, page 30)

Acquiring Skills for the Role

There is no doubt that our personal attributes play a major role in our ability to utilize certain skills, making the difference between the "academic knowledge of the how" and the "practical ability to implement the how." This, however, is very subjective to both the skill and the individual in question and as such, no rule that applies to all can be set.

It is, nevertheless, very beneficial to be aware of what skills are easier to learn that others. Then, each individual needs to be honest with themselves in deciding whether to undertake such a learning effort or not.

For example, one may argue that communication skills can be learned and with practice, a motivated, yet not so good a communicator can become a good communicator. On the other hand, leadership skills are unlikely to be acquired through reading and training at a mature age and as such if one is lacking in leadership skills, then he or she will do well to acknowledge so and concentrate on their stronger attributes and acquirable skills.

A useful tool when assigning the various roles in a program is to draw a simple matrix for each role and outline the skills required for the *particular job* against the skills held by each candidate.

An assessment similar to that outlined in the OGC's (2004) *Successful Delivery Skills* can be utilized. An example is as follows:

Conclusions

Program management is a distinct discipline from project management, and although most project management roles are present in programs (since programs contain projects), there are roles within program management that hold distinct responsibilities and as such require particular skills that differ from their counterparts in projects. Whereas project management deals with outputs (products or deliverables), program management deals with outcomes, the final result brought about through the utilization of such outputs. This constitutes the largest distinction between the two disciplines and is mostly visible in the role of the business change manager.

When selecting the program board and team, one must be aware of the skills needed for the particular roles within that program. Although some skills can be learned, others will be harder to learn or acquire for someone who does not already possess them