Pitfalls in Taking a Project-based View of Programmes

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Abstract

A common view of programme management is essentially project-based, conceiving programme management as an extension of project management. This view underpins methods and pragmatic guidance on programme management practice. Drawing on research into programme management competence, into actual practices used on programmes in commercial and UK public sector organisations, and into organisational factors that help or hinder the management of programmes this paper identifies pitfalls in taking too restrictive a project-based view of programmes. These pitfalls emanate from project management's core tenets of focus, structure, clarity and discipline, making them all the more difficult for many practitioners to perceive and avoid.

Our Contentions

Programme management is now widely used to bring about complex change in commercial and public sector organisations. The approach is used to implement strategy (Partington, 2000), to develop and maintain new capabilities (Pellegrinelli, 1997), to manage information systems (IS) implementations (Ribbers & Shoo, 2002). Supporters claim that programme management can improve the delivery of capabilities, the realisation of benefits and the achievement of strategic goals. For some organisations, especially within the UK public sector, programmes are the mandated vehicles for implementing policy and change.

Yet there is considerable ambiguity and debate surrounding the nature and practice of programme management. When individuals involved in programmes meet one another they spend time trying to understand what the other means by programme management. It is true that programme management is relatively new as a discipline, compared to project management, but there has been well over 15 years of academic and practitioner interest, and many proposed definitions and methods (Ferns, 1991; Gray, 1997; Pellegrinelli, 1997; CCTA, 1999; Murray-Webster & Thiry, 2000; OGC, 2003).

We contend that this ambiguity in part reflects the diversity of environments in which programmes operate, the multiplicity of roles programmes are asked to perform, the organisational constraints or limitations faced by those involved in programmes. However, this ambiguity also reflects a dissonance between the concepts, techniques and best practice guidance offered by professional and governmental bodies and the experiences of leading practitioners and organisations. The prevailing project-based view of programme management, grounded in project management, is ill-suited as a guide to practice for the most complex programmes and for

fluid organic contexts. Complex programmes are characterised by an emergence of needs and solutions, an inability to determine the outcomes of actions in advance and a requirement for close collaboration with stakeholders. Fluid organic contexts are characterised on-going adaptation, blurred boundaries and powerful pervasive that influence the directions and actions of an organisation. The project-based view is too narrow, rational and mechanistic. The blind spots of the project-based view mean individuals and organisations are not alerted to pitfalls which may result in under-performance or outright failure of major programmes.

Competing Views

Authors and professional bodies grounded in a project management tradition have tended to conceive of programme management as an extension of project management. The Project Management Institute's 2004 Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) defines a programme as:

> "a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing individually." (PMBOK, 2004, p.16).

With the project management profession offering programme management as the way of co-ordinating projects to extract value and exert control, experienced project managers have been obvious candidates to manage programmes. Consultants and software companies have provided newly appointed programme managers with familiar tools and frameworks to operate effectively in their new roles. Practitioners, consultants and some government bodies have tried to adapt, refine and enhance project management concepts and techniques to cope with the complications of multiple deliveries, numerous stakeholders, inter-project coordination, shared resources and other characteristics they perceived of programmes (Reiss, 1996; OGC, 2003).

The role and importance of programmes have been elaborated and strengthened by positioning them as pivotal links between strategy and projects in a rational cascade from goals to action. As the Project Management Institute's PMBOK Guide states:

> "Project management exists in a broader context that includes program management, portfolio management and project management office. Frequently there is a hierarchy of strategic plan, portfolio, program, project and sub-project in which a program consisting of several associated projects will contribute to the achievement of a strategic plan." (PMBOK, 2004, p.16)

Structures and processes have been conceived to create tight linkages between an organisation's strategy and the totality of its projects and related change activity (Williams & Parr, 2004; Gaddie, 2003). Proponents of this "enterprise programme management" argue that it gives organisations greater chances of realising their strategies and achieving the desired benefits from their programmes and projects. Enterprise programme management offers greater clarity and control over spend, better deployment of resources and so forth.

However, this project-based view on the role and nature of programmes and presumption (or possibility) of an orderly, rational cascade from strategy to sub-project has been challenged.

Lycett, Rassau and Danson (2004) identify a number of shortcomings in standard programme management approaches and argue that they can be traced to two flawed assumptions; namely that (a) programme management is in effect a scaled-up version of project management, and (b) a "one size fits all" approach to programme management is appropriate. Authors and practitioners with strategic management backgrounds tend to perceive programmes as vehicles for implementing strategy and for bringing about corporate renewal, and as alternative organising structures. They have argued that programmes are qualitatively different phenomena and that organisations that view programmes as large projects tend to shoe-horn programmes into project-level thinking, and so lose most of the benefits sought in setting up programmes in the first place (Pellegrinelli, 1997).

Evidence of successful project managers floundering when promoted into programme roles suggests that new approaches and skills may be required (Pellegrinelli, 2002). Where programme management entails the coordination of related projects, the knowledge and tools gained as project managers are directly applicable in their new role as programme managers. But, where programmes are embedded within the culture and politics of an organisation and seek to bring about transformational change or the realisation of a radical strategy, newly appointed programme managers' grounding in project management needs to be supplemented by a deep understanding of strategic management and organisational development.

In contrasting the strategic management view with the project-based view of programme management, four key differences emerge. First, programmes are emergent phenomena and programme managers need to be more conscious of, and responsive to, external change and shifting strategic goals than indicated by a project-based perspective that promotes the definition and pursuit of fixed objectives and scope. Second, programmes are conceived as frameworks or structures, and so atemporal or with indeterminate time horizons, rather than having linear life-cycles akin to projects. Third, as a vehicle for enhancing corporate vitality programme management is concerned with the nurturing of individual and organisation-wide capabilities as well as the efficient deployment of resources. Fourth, programme management work is intimately bound up with, and determined by, context rather than governed by a common set of transferable principles and processes.

Our Research Findings

Since 2001 we have conducted systematic research into various aspects of programme management with the dual purposes of advancing knowledge and providing useful, robust advice to individuals and organisations. We have applied successfully, and continue to apply, our findings and insights to address real issues in organisations.

Our initial research into programme management competence (Partington, Pellegrinelli & Young, 2005) uncovered four distinct conceptions of programme management work, namely the ways practitioners understand their role, interpret the aims and circumstances of the programme and perform their work. Lower-order conceptions are grounded in core project management concepts and practices while higher-order conceptions are more aligned to ways of thinking and acting emanating from the fields of strategy and leadership. Both the project-based view and the

strategic management view are reflected in the conceptions and practices of individuals involved in programme work. Importantly, individuals holding higher-order conceptions are acknowledged as superior performers both by their organisations and their peers. These individuals tend to be given the most complex, sensitive and difficult programmes.

The competence research was applied successfully in one of the organisations that collaborated in the research to identify those individuals with the current or potential ability to take on major enterprise-wide programmes (Pellegrinelli, Partington & Young, 2003). This experience and subsequent unpublished applications of the competence framework suggest that there are relatively few practitioners who hold higher-order conceptions. Most practitioners, including some senior managers responsible for programme management functions within their organisations, exhibit lower-order conceptions. Most programme managers were previously project managers, promoted into their new role on the basis of good past performance. As long as the inherent complexity of their work can be addressed by their conceptual level, they perform well. Individuals holding lower-order conceptions struggle where the programme demands broad strategic perspective, deep engagement with multiple stakeholders and/or tolerance of ambiguity and change. They tend to recreate, inappropriately, the conditions and structures that served them well in managing projects or more straightforward programmes.

In 2004 we studied actual programme management practices in six organisations (Pellegrinelli, Partington, Hemingway, Mohdzain & Shah, forthcoming). Three were commercial organisations: DaimlerChrysler UK, AstraZeneca and Microsoft, and three were UK public sector bodies: the Department for Constitutional Affairs, the Inland Revenue (now HM Revenue and Customs) and Surrey Police. The public - private sector split was deliberately sought to explore differences in approach. We also wanted to understand how the guide published by the Office of Government Commerce (OGC); *Managing Successful Programmes (MSP)*, was applied. MSP is mandated for UK public sector programmes and is a major influence on how programme management is understood and undertaken in the UK and increasingly in the rest of Europe.

Our research revealed that the formal programme framework and methodology, whether MSP or bespoke, were to varying degrees adopted, ignored, interpreted, adapted, and/or extended. Managers at all levels were acutely aware of the context in which they operated: contextual factors focused their attention and efforts, caused them to make compromises and re-shape the programme, dictated core processes and prompted the stances they took. The programme boundaries were more porous and their scope and course more malleable than implied by MSP (and other standard project-based programme management approaches). By focusing on the creation of a tight link between purpose and process in programme management, the standard approaches underplay, and so offer little or superficial guidance on, the programme's connection and interface with the broader organisational context.

In 2005 we built on our earlier research into programme management competence to explore what organisational factors are perceived by programmes managers as helping or hindering the performance of their work. We also wanted to learn whether there are any differences in perceptions between programme managers holding lower-order conceptions and those holding

higher-order conceptions (Pellegrinelli, Partington, Hemingway, Mohdzain, Shah & Stenning, 2006).

Our research suggested that programme management practitioners holding lower-order conceptions perceive a mechanistic system or environment to be more supportive in the performance of their work. Practitioners holding higher-order conceptions perceive an organic system or environment to better enable the performance of their work. Specifically, lower-order informants desired clarity of roles and responsibility, stability and a directive style of management, while higher-order informants desired flexibility, participation and openness. Lower-order informants relied on formal processes and senior management assistance in accomplishing their work. Budget restrictions, taken for granted for by higher-order informants, are hindering factors in that they seem to generate uncertainty, conflict and less than ideal solutions or outcomes. Higher-order informants wanted to be unshackled, to be trusted and to be allowed to get one with their work as they deemed necessary. These practitioners wanted to set aside methodologies or structures that did not enable their work and to abandon plans that were overtaken by events.

Pitfalls In Taking A Project-Based View

Drawing on our research and work with organisations, we have identified a number of pitfalls associated with a project-based view. Individuals and organisations that fall into these traps do so neither through incompetence nor lack of diligence. Rather, they fall into these traps by drawing on past experience and concepts of best practice that may not be relevant. Typically, they seek to impose degrees of order, control, stability and predictability that are untenable in the circumstances.

Resemblance Pitfall

Senior managers who view programme management as an extension of project management may recruit and promote project and programme managers who hold similar views, even if they are not the best people for the jobs. A strategic management view or higher-order behaviours are unlikely to be recognised and rewarded, and may even be deemed wasteful, inappropriate or disruptive. Consequently, those individuals best able to handle complex programmes may be overlooked or side-lined, and may ultimately leave the organisation. Such senior managers may also tacitly expect programme managers to 'do the job as they would' and so impose inappropriate processes or demand irrelevant outputs. Collectively, such senior managers may unwittingly be hindering the performance of programme management work through their attitudes and ways of working.

Programme managers who hold a project-based view may not perceive a significant difference between project work and programme work and so create structures and processes that mirror those linking a project to its component work packages. In doing so they may overemphasise aspects of the role related to detailed planning, managing inter-dependencies, monitoring progress and intra-programme risks. They tend to replicate, interfere with and excessively scrutinise the work of project managers, and are likely to subtract rather than add value. Effort

and attention to the internal aspects of the programme may lead to less attention being paid to external factors.

Definition Pitfall

A project-based view may encourage managers and organisations to strive for higher levels of programme definition in terms of the desired outcome or 'blueprint' than warranted by fluid programme environments and powerful external influences. The understandable search for clarity and a baseline against which to control and forecast programme outcomes can constrain the flexibility of the programme. In some cases this desire for clear definition may curtail experimentation and testing in favour of the first apparently feasible solution. Attention is then focused on achieving a 'frozen' plan rather than accommodating emerging requirements, exploiting opportunities, capturing incremental benefits and learning from experience.

A robust, enduring definition requires a relatively stable and knowable environment. This presumption may be reasonable for short duration, bounded projects, but is less tenable for long complex programmes that bring about change as they unfold. Commercial organisations, and thus the programmes they run, are subject to forces beyond their control in terms of regulations, consumer trends, competitor activity and developments in technology. Even traditionally stable Government Departments and programmes are buffeted by the winds of globalisation, social change, supra-national legislation, as well as the shifting aspirations of politicians. Moreover, new processes enabled by programme outputs may reveal unforeseen problems or opportunities, and/or may generate interest or rejection amongst stakeholders.

Delineation Pitfall

A project-based view may promote the purpose, internal cohesion and identity of the programme at the expense of embedding the programme within the fabric of the organisation. Setting apart the programme, whether through separate reporting arrangements, dedicated teams, off-site location or branding, can provide focus and momentum. However, this approach may foster an 'us and them' divide and an unspoken belief that the programme is 'right'. Consequently stakeholders, especially other members of the organisation, need to be managed (i.e. persuaded, prompted or sometimes even forced into accepting programme deliverables and outcomes). However, in complex change the 'right' answer is rarely obvious (if it exists at all). Stakeholders have the intimate knowledge of the micro-level details, views on what is valuable and desirable and ultimate responsibility for enacting changes to behaviours, routines and processes. Lack of true engagement limits access to this rich source of knowledge, closes down collaboration and contribution, and increases the chances of a 'not invented here' reaction. Strong delineations and demarcations mean that those performing liaison roles, such as Business Change Managers, have to work harder to facilitate integration and absorption of the programmes deliverables into the organisation.

Decomposition Pitfall

At the heart of the project-based view is a tendency to see programmes as the aggregation of their constituent projects. Consequently, the programme business case is the sum of the project

business cases. The aggregation logic lends itself to the view that project business cases can and should be considered on their individual merits. However, the benefits expected from a programme may not always directly and unequivocally be decomposed and allocated to projects, especially where early project deliverables include enabling infrastructure or technology upon which later projects build. These early projects tend either to suffer from negative financial appraisals or to receive allocations of future benefits to justify their existence. Neither approach provides a sound economic basis for analysing the effects of overruns, alternative scenarios or variations to scope. To compound the problem, in the first instance the contribution of the project, and the team working on it, is not fully recognised. In the second instance, later projects are more likely to be cancelled or de-scoped because of insufficient benefits (already allocated/ accounted for) even though on an incremental basis the project is attractive.

Considering projects in a programme on their own merits may also lead to seeking funds from those that benefit from the project deliverables. This risks parochialism creeping into programme governance under the guise of prudent control of funds, with funders shaping project deliverables to serve their own interests. Where projects (can) build on each other, this parochialism may undermine the creation of most value for the organisation as a whole. Opportunities for adding value to another group or department at little incremental cost may not be pursued. Programmes may lose their integrity and be disconnected from the overarching strategic purpose and enterprise-wide perspective, advantages claimed for their existence.

Can-do Pitfall

Project management places great emphasis on effective risk management and issue resolution to improve the chances of achieving the project's objectives, whether by mitigating adverse events or by exploiting favourable circumstances. At a programme level new risks and issues emerge, such as inter-project dependencies and compatibility of their deliverables, procurement and deployment of resources, or the integration and use of outputs by the organisation. From a project-based view, the task is fundamentally the same – do whatever is required on the programme to achieve the agreed outcome. The possibility of failure may not be truly embraced. Consequently, the nature and implications of failure for the organisation or society may go unexplored. Ways of rendering the organisation less vulnerable in case of failure may not be put into place. The programme may expend lots of effort remedying an adverse situation that may not matter much or that could more effectively be handled elsewhere. Focus on risk management for the programme may deflect from identifying, tracking and acting upon early warning indicators of business or policy failure. Windows of opportunity may close, competition may re-write the rules of the game, new technologies may emerge or public opinion may change. Decisions to stop programmes or radically change their scope and outcomes may be delayed, wasting resources and making remedial action more difficult. Ardent endeavour may win battles but lose wars.

Enterprise-wide Pitfall

Supporters of the project-based view see uncoordinated initiatives as sub-optimal in the achievement of objectives and wasteful of resources. They perceive the promotion of local priorities and interests, and unresolved differences of opinions as unhelpful in the realisation of

organisational goals. Project and programmes managers are sometimes cast as victims of indecision, reversals of policy and political intrigue. The extension of rationality, structure and discipline throughout the organisation is proposed to remedy under-performance on projects and programmes. Such organisation-wide portfolio management or enterprise programme management undoubtedly provides greater order, but may unintentionally stifle responsiveness, innovation and experimentation. If applied unthinkingly, such frameworks may restrain highly competent programme managers or disempower stakeholders. Moreover, set within this formalised context, programme management may appear to leaders of organisations as bureaucratic and similar to strategic planning frameworks discredited and largely abandoned two decades ago (Mintzberg, 1994). Portfolio planning and control frameworks, however well designed, are an ill-advised defence against the rising tide of global change and economic turbulence.

Conclusions

Success often contains the seeds of downfall, and project management has undoubtedly been successful. As the application of the discipline has extended beyond its traditional domains, success has reinforced a subtle perception of almost universal applicability in realising planned change. The pitfalls lie at the frontiers PMI the application of project management and are almost imperceptible to practitioners rooted in its traditions.

Our research and experience indicates that the project-based view does not provide a fit for purpose approach for the most complex and demanding change forced upon organisations that increasingly operate in fluid organic environments. Reliance on the project based view in such circumstances may result in under-performance or even failure. This under-performance affects not only organisations in terms of lost advantages and squandered effort, but also individuals tasked with leading programmes. Without help many competent practitioners are condemned to stumble and struggle, and pay a high personal price in terms of stress and dissatisfaction.

As project and programme management practitioners and members of the professional community, we need to look beyond the project-based view to other disciplines and fields of study and to embrace new, sometimes counter-intuitive, ideas and approaches. Otherwise we should stick to the territory we know well.

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