

Two broad dimensions of program management

By Alan Stretton

ABSTRACT

This short paper briefly discusses two broad dimensions of program management. One is the internally-focused dimension of coordinating the program's related projects, which I have called the "internal linkage dimension" (or more simply the "internal dimension"). This dimension is not presented as a distinctive subject in the literature, but it appears to be important enough to warrant more specific attention than it currently receives. It is planned to discuss inter-project coordination in more detail in a later paper.

The other dimension is what I have called the "external linkage dimension" (or more simply "external dimension"), which is particularly concerned with organizational, business or societal change, strategic management, external stakeholders, delivering benefits, etc. The external dimension of program management is already well covered in the literature, albeit with somewhat different emphases by different writers.

INTRODUCTION

When program management focuses on the coordination of related projects, project management methodologies are applicable to the management of a program. On the other hand, when the focus of change is on business or society, or where complexity increases, program managers need a good understanding of strategic management and organisational change. (Thiry 2010:21)

This paper discusses the two different "focuses" of program management in the above quotation from Thiry 2010 (which are also reflected by some other writers on program management). We start with some definitions.

Definitions of programs/program management.

Whilst there has been substantial agreement about the nature of projects for some time, agreement about the nature of programs has been slower to emerge. In 2006, Maylor et al summarised the position as follows:

An emerging definition of a programme appears to involve the co-ordinated management of a series of inter-connected projects and other non-project work for the delivery of a specific package of benefits.

The definition of program in PMI 2008b is much the same.

A program is a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually.

Thiry 2010:14-16 discusses some of the mainstream definitions of programs/ program management, and suggests the following definition:

A program is a collection of change actions (projects and operational activities) purposely grouped together to realise [...] benefits

The lead quote (*in italics above*) might suggest that program management has an option of focusing either on the coordination of related projects, (which I will call the “internal dimension”), or on change outcomes in business or society (the “external dimension”). Of course the reality is that that program management is strongly concerned with managing both the internal and external dimensions.

With regard to management of the internal dimension, this is primarily concerned with ‘inter-project coordination’ (Arto et al 2009) amongst the program’s related projects. This is a dimension which is unique to programs, but which does not appear to have been addressed as a separate issue in the literature. Surely it should be.

With regard to the external dimension, all the definitions above include the delivery of benefits, whilst the lead quotation mentions change is on business or society, strategic management and organisational change. A program’s external dimension is a much wider canvas, which has been described in various ways. One example follows.

Internal and external linkage dimensions

The following linkage model by Strange 1998a examples both internal linkages with component projects, and external linkages to a variety of stakeholders and other interfaces that the program must accommodate/manage.

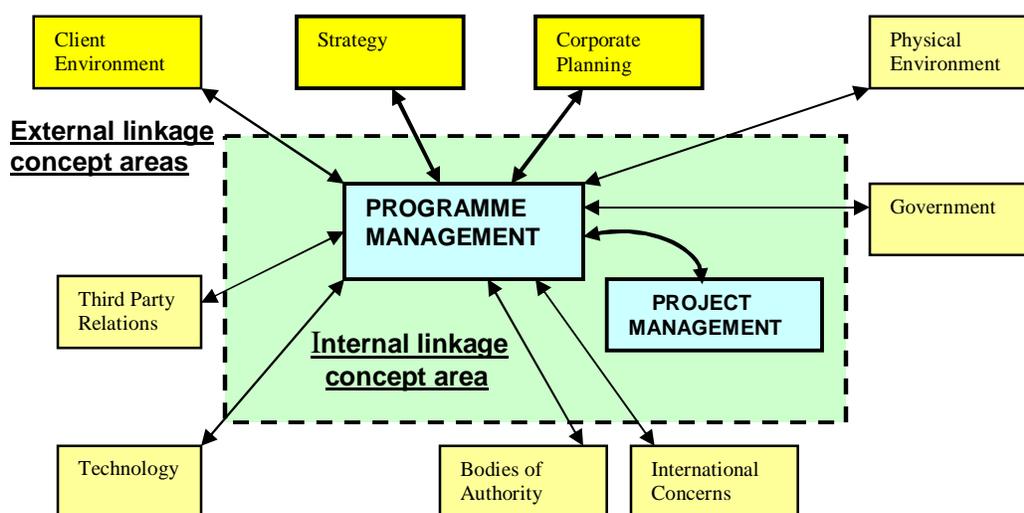


Figure 1: Strange 1998, Figure 3 – information flows within a programme management meta model environment

Instead of using Strange's descriptors "concept areas", I have used the terminology "dimensions", and discuss both the "internal (linkage) dimension" and the "external (linkage) dimension".

THE INTERNAL LINKAGE DIMENSION

When program management focuses on the coordination of related projects, project management methodologies are applicable to the management of a program. On the other hand, when the focus of change is on business or society, or where complexity increases, program managers need a good understanding of strategic management and organisational change. (Thiry 2010:21)

This section on the internal linkage dimension is primarily concerned with the (underlined) first sentence of this lead quotation. It is a little difficult to interpret what Thiry means by "focuses" in this context. As noted earlier, it could be taken to imply that the program manager has a choice about where to focus. In reality, he/she has to focus substantially on both areas indicated in this lead quotation.

With regard to the first part of this first sentence, the coordination of related projects is undoubtedly a unique and integral part of the work of program management, as already discussed. However, I disagree with the second part of the first sentence, which says that project management methodologies are applicable to this aspect of the management of a program. The basis of my disagreement is as follows:

- The management of individual component projects of the program certainly involves project management methodologies. However, this is the domain of the individual project managers, and not of the program manager. As PMI 2008b:8 says, "Program managers coordinate efforts between projects but do not manage them".
- Coordinating efforts between related projects via their project managers does not appear to me to involve project management methodologies to any substantial degree. My own experience is that it is a significantly different task, requiring a substantially different set of skills. An important difference is that one is working with, and through, substantially autonomous project managers, which in itself can be quite a challenge. This leads to other types of inter-project situations which one simply does not encounter in straight project management.
- I have not seen any data in the program/project literature on this which would confirm or dispute my own experience. This is doubtless because the management work involved in undertaking inter-project coordination has not yet been separately identified in the literature. But, some relevant materials do appear in various parts of this literature, and I plan to try and pull these together in a later paper.

In the meantime, I would welcome reader contributions re inter-project coordination.

THE EXTERNAL LINKAGE DIMENSION

When program management focuses on the coordination of related projects, project management methodologies are applicable to the management of a program. On the other hand, when the focus of change is on business or society, or where complexity increases, program managers need a good understanding of strategic management and organisational change. (Thiry 2010:21)

The focus of this section is on the second (underlined) sentence of this quotation. There is abundant material in the literature which associates program management with change initiatives, particularly strategic management, organisational change, and business change on the one hand; and broader societal change on the other.

Referring to Figure 1 above, Strange 1998a shows external linkages to a variety of stakeholders and other interfaces that the program must accommodate/manage. There are substantial materials in the literature on program/project stakeholder management/engagement, and, in Stretton 2010e, I developed a reasonably detailed checklist for identifying potential program/project stakeholders, with guides to classifying them.

However, external stakeholder management is only one element of managing the external dimension. There are other elements, many of which also intersect with managing internal linkages, and these are discussed at length in the three most widely used standards on program management.

The two standards on program management most widely used in the West are *The Standard for Program Management* (PMI 2008b) and *Managing Successful Programs* (OGC 2007). A third important standard is Japan's *P2M Project and Program Management for Enterprise Innovation* (PMAJ 2008). Each of these three standards covers both internal and external dimensions in somewhat different ways. However, as already indicated, none of these standards gives as much attention to the coverage of internal dimensions as the importance of the latter warrants.

On the other hand, their combined coverage of external dimensions is very substantial indeed. Further, as Thiry 2010 suggests, each standard covers a slightly different area of the whole range of endeavours that comprise program management, as he illustrated in his Figure 1-3 (which I do not have the drafting skills to reproduce here).

Finally, Thiry 2010 develops his own (again somewhat different) approach in substantial detail in this book *Program Management*.

All told, there is a very wide coverage of external dimensions of program management in the literature.

CONCLUSION

This paper has introduced two different dimensions of program management. One is an internal linkage dimension, which is primarily concerned with coordinating the program's related projects. This dimension is unique to program management, but is not addressed as a separate issue in the literature. It appears to be important enough to warrant more attention, and it is planned to discuss this in more detail in a later paper.

The other dimension is an external linkage dimension, which is particularly concerned with organizational, business or societal change, strategic management, external stakeholders, delivering benefits, etc. This dimension is already covered in substantial detail in the literature, notably in the three most widely used standards for program management (PMI 2008b, OGC 2007 and PMAJ 2008) and in Thiry 2010.

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Alan Stretton is one of the pioneers of modern project management. He is currently a member of the Faculty Corps for the University of Management & Technology (UMT), USA. In 2006 he retired from a position as Adjunct Professor of Project Management in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Australia, which he joined in 1988 to develop and deliver a Master of Project Management program. Prior to joining UTS, Mr. Stretton worked in the building and construction industries in Australia, New Zealand and the USA for some 38 years, which included the project management of construction, R&D, introduction of information and control systems, internal management education programs and organizational change projects. He has degrees in Civil Engineering (BE, Tasmania) and Mathematics (MA, Oxford), and an honorary PhD in strategy, programme and project management (ESC, Lille, France). Alan was Chairman of the Standards (PMBOK) Committee of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) from late 1989 to early 1992. He held a similar position with the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), and was elected a Life Fellow of AIPM in 1996. He was a member of the Core Working Group in the development of the Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management. He has published over 100 professional articles. Alan can be contacted at alanailene@bigpond.com.au.