

Pracademic Program Leadership: The Firefighter's Guide to Planning Success^{1, 2}

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Abstract

Program Leadership and Program Management are often confused with typical organizational leadership and management positions based on traditional organizational challenges and opportunities. What makes the current day Program Leader and Program Manager unique is the need to provide direction and action in an expedited manner, to help resolve the constant organizational “Fires” that consume their time and efforts.

Keywords: Program Leadership, Program Manager, Firemanship, Program Performance Loop, Situation, Plan, Result, Feedback, People Resources.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an exploration of the current challenges for Program Managers and Leaders in modern organizations based on the need for immediate action and direction. Most program managers will tell you that they feel like they have “too much on their plate” to be effective. Every day brings an avalanche of email, phone calls, text messages and meetings that make it impossible to understand accurately what is happening in a timely manner. A firefighter's planning approach brings with it the opportunity to excel.

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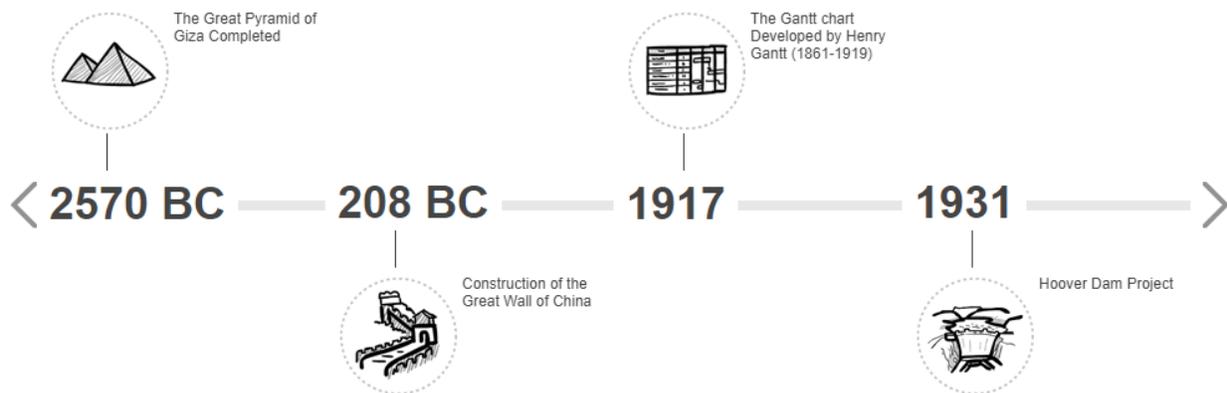
² Author's Note: The Program Planning Performance Loop development and flow diagrams were sponsored by the Rocky Peak Leadership Center. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Dale S. Deardorff, Rocky Peak Leadership Center, 11238 Sierra Pass Place, Chatsworth, California, CA 91311, United States. Email: dale.deardorff@csun.edu

Program Management and Program Managers

Program management is a professional field that shadows project management, however, both fields are linked together. Program management became a clear unique entity in 2000 with the publication of the first PMI PMBOK which described a program as “a group of projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually”. This definition has incrementally evolved to “a program is defined as related projects, subsidiary programs, and program activities managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually” (PMI Global Standard, 2017).

Most modern-day Program Managers were Project Managers, and through practice and experience moved into the program management position. The primary difference between the roles is that program managers work at a strategic level where project managers work at a tactical level. The skills required to be a project manager are still required at a program manager's level, but the skill required to plan is essential for both. If we look at an abbreviated project management timeline, we can see historically how the first project and program managers were utilized starting with the pyramid construction in 2570 BC in Egypt.

Figure 1.0 Abbreviated Project Management Timeline



Abbreviated Project Management Timeline (Haughey, 2021)

- **2570 BC** - The Pharaohs built the pyramids, and even today archaeologists argue about how they achieved this. Ancient records show there were “managers” for each of the four faces of the Great Pyramid with responsibilities for their completion. This required a great degree of planning, execution and control.

- **208 BC** - The first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huang, managed the Great Wall of China during the Qin Dynasty (221BC-206BC). Historical data identifies the labor force was broken into three groups (soldiers, ordinary people, criminals).
- **1917** – The Gantt chart was developed by Henry Gantt (1861-1919) which was used on the Hoover Dam Project starting in 1931. At that time, the scheduling diagram was considered a radical idea but today it is essential for project and program managers.

From 1931 to today, the timeline has seen the addition of Agile, Lean methodologies and acceptance of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity), which changed the interdependencies framework for managing interrelated groupings of work. The previously presented abbreviated timeline shows where we have come from but does not provide predictions for where we will go in the future. So, let's fast forward to 2023. Today, program management and program managers are very common in matrix organizations. They fit with modern day publications and adhere to the methodologies described in the Program Management Life Cycle.

Program Management Life Cycle

The field of Program Management has specific goals and objectives designed to align with “organizational strategy and ensure organizational benefits are recognized” (Didinsky, p. 11). A program is defined as a group of related projects, subprojects, and program operational management activities managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually. Organizations use the program structure to execute their organizational strategies because of the alignment to a program life cycle format. The Program Life Cycle has three phases:

- **Program Definition** – during this phase, the program sponsor approves program funding and fully defines the expected program outcomes.
- **Program Benefits Delivery** – during this phase, the program manager plans, integrates, and manages program components to facilitate delivery of intended program objectives.
- **Program Closure** – during this phase, the program manager executes the controlled closure of the program.

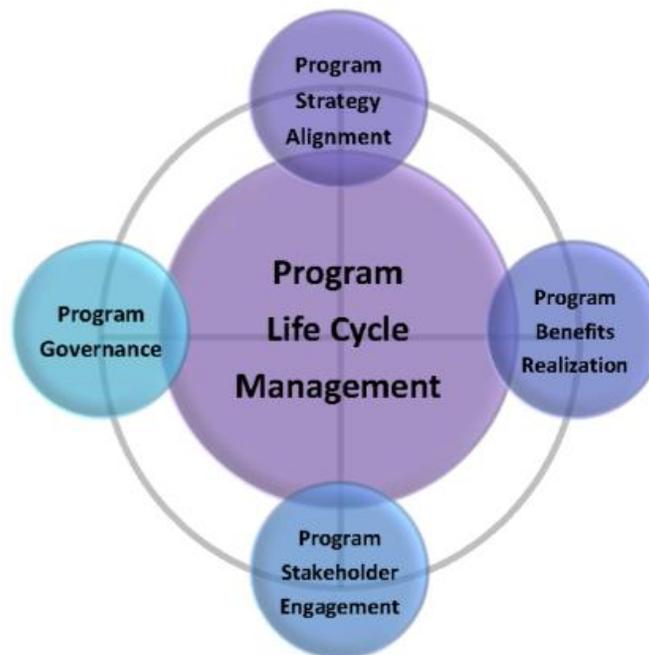
In each of these three phases, the ability to “Plan” is an essential and critical skill for effective and efficient program execution. I want you to imagine for a moment the planning effort that was required to build a pyramid in Mesa Egypt 5000 years ago. This pyramid needed to be 450 feet high and you only had 20 years to build it. You needed to move the stones from a quarry ten miles

away to the construction site. Additionally, you had a recurring workforce of 10,000 skilled workers that required food and lodging as part of their employment contract. There are stone carvings and papyrus diagrams that show the engineering characteristics required to construct the project but there were no modern-day technologies.

You can obviously see the challenges of the proposed pyramid situation and the need for program management guidance. Let's take a quick look at the future and we can see that there will be future program managers required for advanced space travel, bio/pharma medical devices, baby boomer illnesses, interconnected fast rail transportation across the US into Canada and Mexico, weather phenomena resolution, global water, power and food program challenges, etc..... One thing that is constant in all of these future programs is they need a plan.

Currently, modern Program Management is broken into both program planning phases and performance domains as part of the program life cycle and governance. Program Life Cycle Management is also cyclic & iterative and oversees the different required planning phases and domains. These program planning phases are typically aligned with the PMI (Project Management Institute) Global Standard program management performance domains which contain complementary activities and related areas as seen in figure 2.0.

Figure 2.0 Program Management Performance Domains



(The Practitioners Guide to Program Management, Didinsky, I. 2017, p.18)

Within the program lifecycle management flow there are four “sub-domains” or elements of structure. These are the:

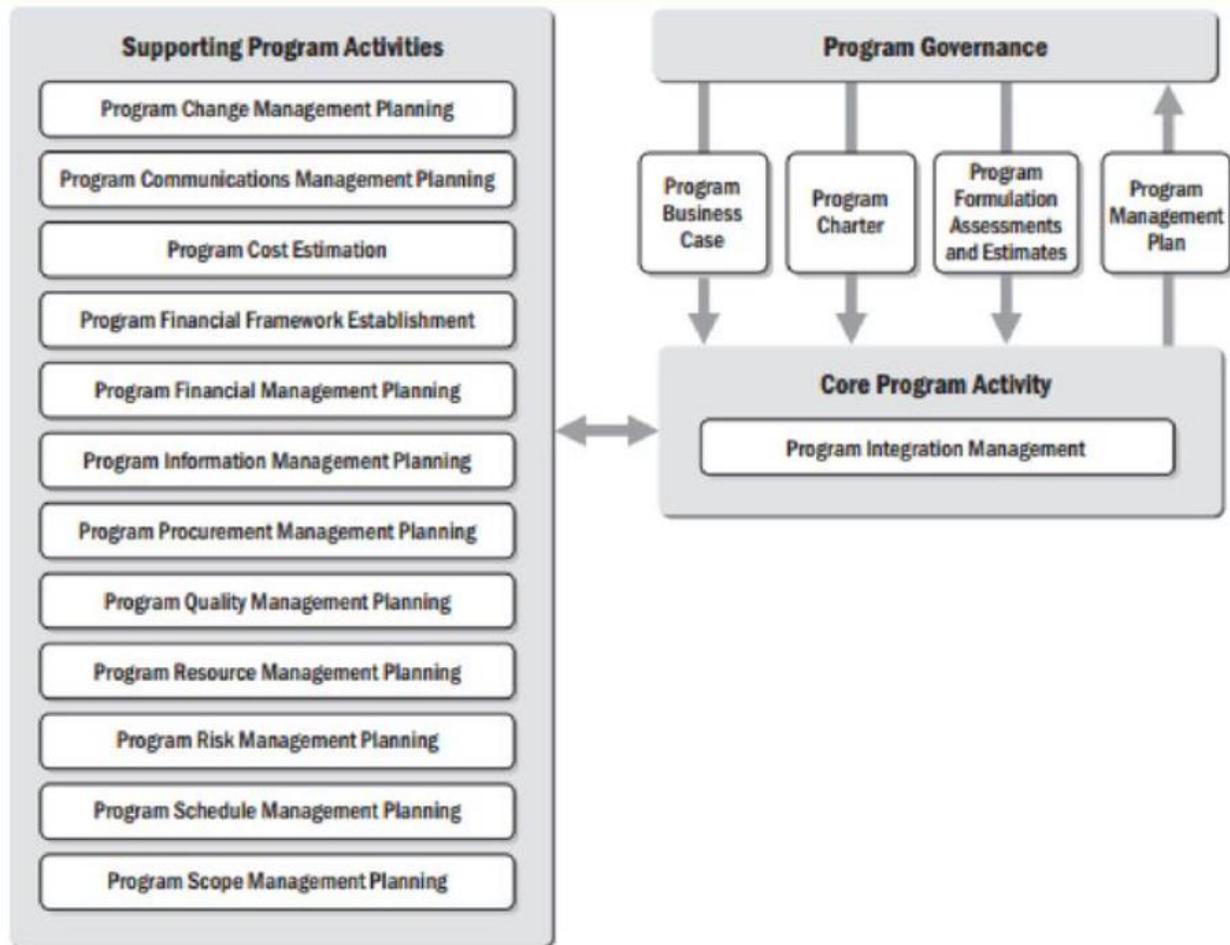
- **Program Stakeholder Engagement** – identifies, captures, and understands the stakeholder needs, desires, expectations & communications to understand the impact of the program.
- **Program Governance** – establishes processes and procedures for maintaining program management oversight and decision making while maintaining program oversight.
- **Program Strategy Alignment** – identifies opportunities, goals, outputs and benefits to achieve the strategic objectives through overall program implementation.
- **Program Benefits Realization** – defines, creates, maximizes, sustains and delivers the benefits provided by the program.

These domains are iterative and run concurrently through the duration of the program. The VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) impact on the program being implemented determines the intensity of the interactions required between each of the four domains.

The program life cycle management focuses on program benefits realization where the majority of program planning is required. This realization is a process flow that encompasses benefits identification, analysis and planning, delivery, transition and sustainment. Program managers have a duty to focus on these benefits performance domains. The types of plans or planning required for program managers, in the program life cycle, vary and can include plans that support the program activities and many different activity plans to realize organizational desired benefits. The “master” plan, which could be referred to as a macro-plan, is defined as a very high-level description of the program or project. It describes only what is essential and covers the highlights.

This level of detail is important and establishes the program architecture and roadmap of required plans shown in figure 3.0:

Figure 3.0 Program Planning Phase Activity Interaction



(The Standard for Program Management, Fourth Edition, PMI. 2017, p.111)

Defined above is the list of integrated program plan activities required for a program manager to develop and lead. To accomplish the collaborative construction of these activities requires: micro planning of key risks and areas of uncertainty & complexity; micro planning areas that require internal & external change. The essential details created in these types of plans can eliminate obstacles to help create the smooth execution of their completion.

One skill that great Program Manager's (PM's) have is the ability to ignore the outside distractions and to create a blending of macro and micro program plans. Everyone has some level of basic planning skills they learned in their youth, but the outstanding PM's have refined it and can

demonstrate it on any program. There are four unique types of programs identified. Each requires the program manager to be proficient and versatile enough to work in any or all of them.

These are the Administrative-Focused Program, Facilitation-Focused Program, Integration-Focused Program and the Business-Focused Program. Each of these unique types of programs require multiple skill sets to meet the program management functions. After a careful review of the PMI documents, you can see the need for advanced planning skills. Unfortunately, the PMI reference documents do not describe a process for “How” to plan. Accomplishing this requires an acceptance of a new type of program manager philosophy. What is needed are program managers who are versed in the skill of “Firemanship”.

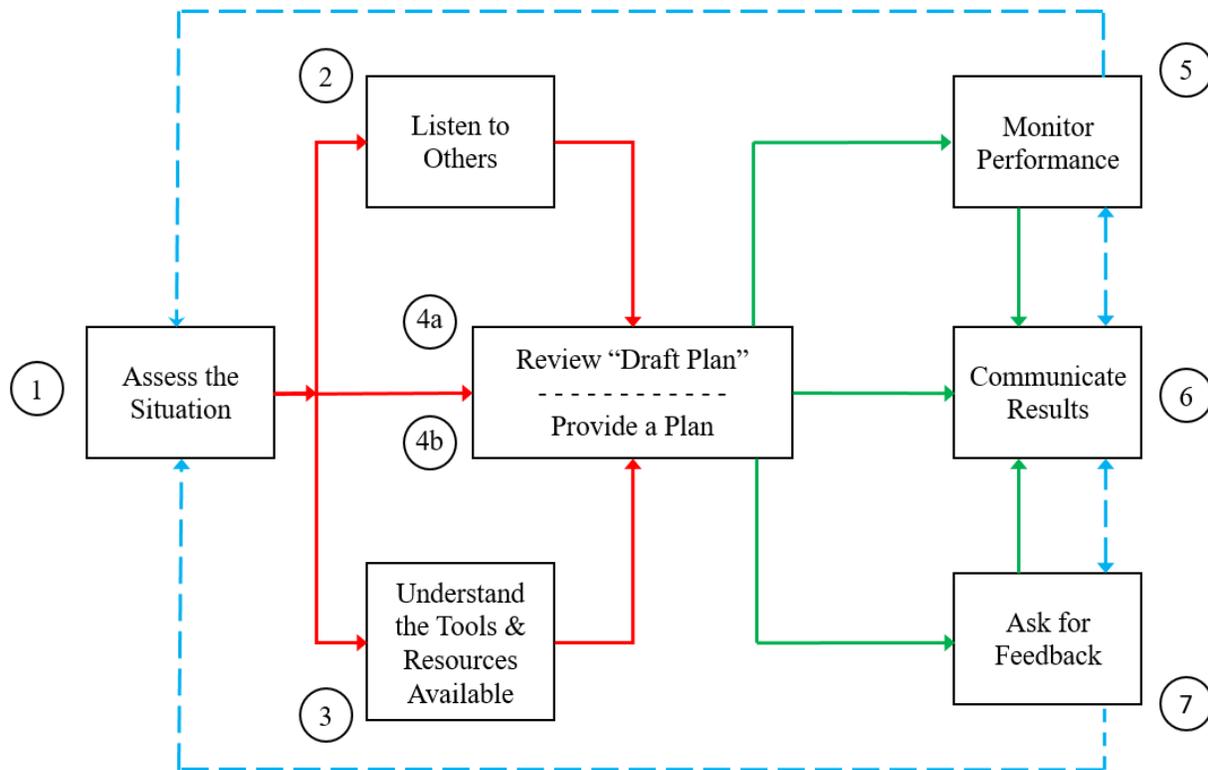
Firemanship

The term “Firemanship” is a combination of not only the right knowledge and skills, but also the right attitude, self-discipline and a desire to perform the best in challenging times. This ultimately requires the following 7-steps that firefighters typically use, which can also be utilized by Project and Program Managers to create a quick, solid plan:

- Assess the Situation
- Listen to Others
- Understand the tools and people resources at your disposal
- Provide a plan for success
- Monitor the performance
- Communicate the results
- Ask for feedback

This simplistic flow of seven planning steps can help you structure an approach to program success that can be implemented immediately and understood easily. The interconnected flow is broken down into three separate flow cycles shown in figure 4.0.

Figure 4.0 Program Planning Performance Loop



Program Planning Performance Loop

By utilizing a Program Planning Performance Loop as seen in figure 4.0, you can develop primary perceptive skills shown in the first flow cycle identified in the red loop. These skills can allow you to clearly understand the capabilities in your control to create a successful plan (steps 1-4). This is followed by an additional flow cycle identified in the green loop (steps 5 through 7). The final flow cycle shown with blue lines helps to communicate the plan, monitor the plan and provide feedback on the plan performance where the situation can then be reassessed. The overall structure of these planning process skills aligns themselves with a continuous process improvement philosophy and systemic process for gaining knowledge for understanding the outcomes of the program environment. Let's explore these seven steps of the *Program Planning Performance Loop* to understand their contributions to program management and leadership success.

Step-1 Assess the Situation

Assessing the situation requires the use of all of your perception skills. These skills are many times overlooked or dismissed as part of critical thinking, but they can enhance your mental thinking abilities. The perception skills of *Sight*, *Sound*, *Taste*, *Smell* and *Touch* are a combination of sensory cues that can help you develop a clearer picture of a situation.

- ***Sight*** – the ability to see something clearly may mean that you need to either look at something from a different angle or view it closer to see a problem or imperfection.
- ***Sound*** – the ability to hear sounds that may be different from the operation of something previously can give you an indication that something is getting ready to break or cause a problem at a later time.
- ***Taste*** – the ability to taste is used by chefs to make sure that a recipe or a formula is correct. This requires the ability to adjust mixtures accurately to get the correct flavor profile.
- ***Smell*** – the ability to smell can provide you with an indication that something is present that should not be there. It can also provide an indication of the location of a problem or potential issue.
- ***Touch*** – the ability to determine if a surface is supposed to be smooth, rough or has imperfections. You can use this sense to immediately identify if there is a problem.

You can easily see how important your perception skills become for assessing a situation accurately.

Step-2 Listen to others

As described in the previous step, the skill of sound is essential. Now we want to build upon that competency with the focused ability to listen to others. Good listening requires the ability to ask the right questions. This needs to be followed with active listening and clarification of what is heard.

Current research shows that the average person listens with only 25% efficiency due to our tendency to interrupt each other or add our input into what others are saying. As a “Type A Extrovert”, I find myself doing this all the time and need to purposely stop talking over others or interrupting. Additionally, our brains have a limited capacity for paying attention due to the technology and external stimulations around us. To assure we are listening to others, we should focus on the three following techniques:

- **Ask the right questions** – many times we only ask questions where we already know the answers. This allows us to reinforce our current mental models and create a bias to different information. You should ask questions that open up dialog and allow exploration of new alternatives.
- **Become an active listener** – to become an active listener, you must learn to not interrupt, maintain face contact, listen to non-verbal cues and listen without judging or jumping to conclusions.
- **Repeat Backs** – the final required listening ability is the technique of asking the other person for confirmation on what they are saying. This can be accomplished by repeating back to them what they stated with a simple statement like “what I hear you saying is”.

With the addition of the second step to the program planning performance loop, you can gain great clarity and build upon the development of your personal listening skills.

Step-3 Understand the Tools and People Resources available

The tools available to leaders, for creating a realistic and achievable plan, include Data Analytics and Decision-Making processes that may provide additional insights and perspectives for clearly identifying the situation, events, impacts and consequences. Historical information and lessons learned can be important additional points of reference for leaders. Ultimately, the right information at the right time becomes essential. This relies on “Key” people’s input and opinions to assist the leader. This may mean that there needs to be clear Delegation of Authority within the organization so that there is a minimum “wait time” for essential input and information. Clear avenues of authority help to streamline the stagnation that can encumber smooth planning and plan execution. Additionally, this creates an organizational philosophy where the leader or leadership team can get quick answers to their questions.

Step-4 Provide a Plan for Success

Step-4 is broken into two separate sections. The first section is to review the “Draft Plan” and involves the coordination and completion of the internal and external stakeholders. The second section is to “Provide a Plan” step 4(b) which can be transitioned to the second phase for program management execution. The draft plan should be approved prior to the final plan submission to stakeholders, customers and team members.

Step-4(a) Review “Draft Plan”

This is the step where you take the “Draft Plan” version of the constructed plan and coordinate it with anyone who will be impacted by the plan. You should make sure that all internal & external stakeholders and customers have the ability to provide comments or input prior to releasing and publishing the plan. This also provides you with the opportunity to make any corrections or alterations required. Unfortunately, this is a choke point where you can't go forward without giving others a chance to provide input. A standard process of notifying others is essential. You're not looking for formal approval from them – you're providing them with a 24-48 hr. window to review and alert you to any showstoppers or major issues. You're trying to establish a consensus with others where they may not agree with everything in the plan, but they can live with it. If input is received back in the time requested, it is your responsibility to review it and make changes or adjustments to correct or optimize the plan prior to executing the plan in step 4(b).

Step-4(b) Provide a Plan

As simple as this sounds, it is one of the key areas that great leaders excel in and poor leaders stumble. Too often an inexperienced leader waits until they have “every” possible piece of information before they create a final plan. This hesitation is sometimes based on a philosophy that if they ignore it, the plan will develop itself or the problem will go away. Neither of these tactics is smart or successful. The experienced leader knows that an “imperfect” plan acted upon will likely be more successful than trying to complete the perfect plan to implement. They understand what the key essential elements are and evaluate the risks associated with the lacking elements. They create a 95% probability and likelihood of success which allows them to move forward. There is a great quote by George S. Patton:

“An imperfect plan implemented immediately and violently will always succeed better than a perfect plan”

Providing a plan requires the ability to quickly define and visualize the steps and milestones required for completion. The recommended suggestion is to start with the end goal first and then step through the sub-tasks required to complete it all the way to the first step. This process will prevent you from creating unneeded steps just because they have been completed that way previously. Make sure to do this as a team or group effort so you can get everyone's input and agreement on the plan. This also means the plan should be specific and realistic with incremental milestones and manageable chunks. Publish and distribute the plan to the essential people

resources that require it for execution. This may require multiple methods of communication and potentially the need to over-communicate the plan and expectations to assure it is understood.

The *Program Planning Performance Loop* figure clearly demonstrates that the previous steps all focus on providing a plan. This is the first half of the process. The second half of the process will focus on increasing the awareness and impact of the distributed plan. It reviews the effectiveness of the plan based on situational awareness. These next three process steps also loop back to the start of the process to provide continuous assessment and improvement. These steps include:

Step-5 Monitor performance

Any time we execute a plan, there should be some level of measurement based on the type of plan we have implemented. Performance monitoring involves the measurement of performance over time against milestones of performance. The bottom line is to determine if the required things (actions or behaviors) are getting done. It's the process of collecting observation points.

You may have developed KRI's (Key Results Indicators) or KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) that would allow you to create a quantifiable measurement of performance over time for a specific objective. Additionally, if you are in an Agile environment, you may want to create OKR's (Objectives and Key Results). There is no one way to provide this feedback that is perfect in all situations. It is up to the leader to determine how they want to track progress towards achieving the elements or milestones in the plan.

Performance measurements can be in the form of schedule or time measurements, cost or budget allocations, workload or output measurements, effectiveness and efficiency measurements and productivity measurements. Many plans are tracked by using MS Project or a similar task tracker which gives you visibility into how a project is measured against its schedule. Remember that a schedule is not a plan. The main difference between planning and scheduling is that planning determines what and how much needs to be accomplished while scheduling defines who and when the tasks, sub-tasks and program elements will be performed.

Step-6 Communicate results

The process of Communicating Results is one of the most important and essential steps a leader can take to make sure that everyone on a Program or a Project understands how we will move forward. Communication will also clearly and effectively transmit technical and business concepts,

ideas, feelings, opinions, and conclusions orally and in writing. Another feature is the distribution of alternative plans or contingency planning.

The old adage that it allows us to get everyone on the same page is very accurate – Plan the work and work the plan. There are many different variations of the “Plan” quote attributed to others, but the bottom line is that communication of the results moving through a plan will help to Provide Transparency, Optimize Resources and Allow Delegation and Accountability.

Step-7 Ask for feedback

The term “feedback” is used to describe the helpful information or criticism about prior actions or behaviors from an individual, communicated to another individual (or a group) who can use that information to adjust and improve current and future actions and behaviors. It lets us know what we’re doing right and what we’re doing wrong. You should reach out to all internal and external stakeholders, customers or people impacted by the plan and request continuous input. The primary advantage of receiving feedback is that it lets you quickly know if there is a problem, issue or concern that needs to be addressed. If honest and open dialog is expressed, the results can help you move your organization and the plan forward in a positive direction.

Feedback Loops

In this process step, you should gather the feedback, analyze the feedback and act on the insights using the feedback loop. These can be seen as the blue dashed lines in figure 4 on page 8. A feedback loop is a process that “loops” the outputs of a system back in as inputs. In the *Program Planning Performance Loop*, this means using stakeholder, customer or employee feedback to improve a product, service, or workplace plan. A business uses the insights gained from feedback to initiate required changes to optimize the plans. This is pushing the performance monitoring and feedback activities back to repeat step-1. You will reassess the situation to make sure the plan is still as effective and efficient as possible.

Gaining feedback quickly is crucial to the effectiveness of feedback loops. It allows you to evaluate progress towards the goals, and course correct accordingly to meet those goals.

Program Management Infrastructure

Program management has become an organizational focus for many leaders to assure adherence to enterprise strategic goals and objectives. A program management infrastructure is an underlying

framework that contains the description of the organization or business system's projects, products, people, processes and platforms functioning within an enterprise. Program planning is composed of a multitude of activities but "planning must precede execution, analysis and adjustment" (Springer, p.27, 2016). Ultimately, a program management infrastructure contains the systems of standards, procedures and guidelines that define how the program lifecycle management domains function and interact as a series of systems. It is proposed by the author of this publication that the *Program Planning Performance Loop* be added to the standard program management process as a sub process for plan development that can be quickly adapted for use on programs. A quick review of the PgMP[®] (Program Management Professional) certification focuses on advanced experience and skills for program managers but lacks an enterprise planning tool. Scrum boards plan "Sprints" focused at the project level and Agile waterfall planning methodologies have become a staple for project planning processes for scope, time and cost management. These allow project managers to move quickly but program managers are constrained by elements of stagnation when trying to create a quick plan.

Program planning requires an ability to think beyond planning, the next iteration, or product backlog. It requires the ability to plan the interconnection between the enterprises strategies and goals while maintaining a clear vision of the organization's overall resources, standards, policies and compliance to SOP's (Standard Operating Procedures). We are taught "How" to plan as children by our parents and in schools. Very few of us have ever had a mentor who provided us a "Process" for planning and explained the many nuances with how it works. The majority of us have developed our planning skills based on trial-and-error methods. When a plan works well, we remember what we did. When a plan goes sideways, we try not to repeat the elements that were a problem.

Conclusion

The primary mission of a program manager is to manage using high-level plans that track the interdependencies and progress of program components and elements. These program plans are used to guide planning at the component level. Program management planning requires a blend of Micro and Macro-Planning to be effective.

The *Program Planning Performance Loop* can provide a process based structure or skeleton to complete a blended plan with the ability to add the necessary details to make it achievable and successful. With practice using the process, you can refine your skills and move from being a novice planner to a proficient planner. Ultimately, this will help program managers focus more of their free time to identify and control the interdependencies between projects. Monitoring project

performance allows the program manager to address escalated problems and issues that impact the overall plan in a timely manner.

If an organization wanted to excel in program governance oversight, they can add the *Program Planning Performance Loop* to their internal policies and best practices. Planning the process will help bridge the gap between the current state of the organization and the desired future state. You need to be able to investigate, assess, and plan the support structure that will assist the program in achieving its goals. As the PMI documentation indicated, the program activities enable a strategic approach to planning, monitoring and controlling, and delivering program outputs and benefits.

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Dr. Dale S. Deardorff worked for Boeing Integrated Defense Systems and Space Propulsion Development divisions as a Project and Program manager for over 20 years. He worked for the Lockheed Burbank “Skunk” works and Aircraft division for almost 10 years and a high technology Valencia California start up for a couple of years. This 30 plus years’ experience is a “Pracademic” blending of commercial, military, government, NASA and high technology organizations. Dale has taught Project Management “on-line” for multiple universities as an adjunct instructor since 2003 and continues to contribute to project management methodologies and philosophies as a current thought leader.

He created the Rocky Peak Leadership Center in 2010 and has helped modern organizations as an enterprise and executive consultant in the areas of thinking methodologies, Innovation and leadership training and facilitation. Dr. Deardorff volunteers with youth leadership programs and supports local youth training in the areas of personal mastery and effective collaboration techniques.

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