Program and Program Management Definitions
(New and improved)

As regular readers will know, last month we published a book excerpt that provided a valuable Primer on Program Management. This references starts out with an excellent and detailed definition of Program Management – as it applies to large and complex construction undertaking. But since then, I have been thinking about the definition of the term Program Management in general and concluded that there appears to be no well established, effective but succinct definition of the term.

So I turned to the offerings on my famous Glossary of Project Management Terms and extracted the three definitions that I felt were most complete yet succinct. Why three? Because there appear to be three distinct sets of circumstances that embody the essence of a program situation. I then sent all three off to my good friend Darya Dumar who has direct personal experience in this area.

Here is what I sent to her:

Program

Any one of:
1. A portfolio of projects selected and planned in a coordinated way so as to achieve a set of defined objectives, giving effect to various (and often overlapping) initiatives and/or implementing a strategy.
2. A single, large or very complex project, or
3. A set of otherwise unrelated projects bounded by a business cycle. [03895]

Program Management ("PgM")

The effective management of a program that may cover any or all of the following:
- A portfolio of projects related to some common objective;
- An organization's business strategy which is to be implemented through projects;
- The interdependencies between a number of projects, and
- Resource allocation amongst a portfolio of projects. [D03742]

Or:
The governance and harmonized management of a number of projects and other actions to achieve targeted benefits and create value for the program sponsors in the short term, change recipients in the medium term, and the organization in the long term. [D06930]

Darya Dumar's view

Here is what Darya responded:

> I like #1 – but comment:
> A portfolio I would say a group or collection or assembly
> (a) of projects selected and planned in a coordinated way so as to achieve a set of defined I would stay away from the word defined, as it implies a certainty that is not always present
> (b) maybe "stated" or "identified" but objectives I would say benefits
> (c) giving effect maybe influencing or initiating organizational initiatives
> to various (and often overlapping) initiatives or implementing an organizational strategy . I don't think you need "and" – most definition writers frown on "and/or"

For the second option of Program Management, Darya's comments are:

a. Portfolio in there might create confusion with the definition of a portfolio.
b. I like selected and planned, better than what PMI says – which implies that putting together a group of projects is a choice. My perspective is that a program is a program is a program and distinct from a project or putting together a group of projects for convenience.
c. Benefits is a really good word as the focus of a program is different than the focus of a project. For example, projects' time and cost objectives within a program may be sacrificed in order to achieve the benefits of a program.

Love it! Particularly the focus on governance. I like harmonized, very much, although my engineering brain is saying should it not be "integrated" – but many do not understand what "integrated" means and perhaps it is overused in our world:

The governance and harmonized management of a number of projects and other actions to achieve targeted benefits and create value.

What about "supporting activities" instead of "other actions"?

But I bet the balance of this might be controversial, I agree that "create value" begs the question "to whom". Some suggestions to keep it a bit looser.

for the program sponsors in the short term, for the organization owning the program in the short term; change recipients in the medium term, for the recipients of intended benefits in the medium term; and the organization in the long term. for most stakeholders in the long term.

I will look forward to seeing the results on your website. Stay well!

Ciao!

Darya

Conclusive update

So "bottom line", as they say, the following definitions were concluded:

Program

Any one of the following main possibilities:
1. A collection of projects selected and planned in a coordinated way so as to achieve a set of stated benefits, by influencing (often overlapping) initiatives, or by implementing an organizational strategy.
2. A single, large or very complex project, or
3. A set of otherwise unrelated projects bounded by a business cycle.

Program Management ("PgM")

The effective management of a program that may cover any or all of the following:
- A collection of projects related to some common objective(s);

- An organization's business strategy that is to be implemented through projects;
- The interdependencies between a number of projects, and
- Resource allocation amongst a collection of projects.

Or:

The governance and integrated management of a number of projects and their supporting activities:
- To achieve targeted benefits and create value for the organization owning the program in the short term,
- For the recipients of the intended benefits in the medium term, and
- For the majority of the stakeholders in the long term.

Comment

According to Darya, "One very interesting thought that came bubbling up through the discussions [in my classes] is that people involved in programs don't want them to end, whereas a project that does not have an end is demotivating. Even people whose job depends on the project want it to end."

According to Max, "Nevertheless, I have been on large multi-year projects where some of the operatives do their level best to make their project last as long as possible because it represents a valuable source of income."