The Handbook of Program Management:
How to Facilitate Project Success with Optimal Program Management
By James T. Brown
(A book review by R. Max Wideman)
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Introduction

We have long thought of Program Management as a magnified version of project management, that is, project management only more so. Or, going in the opposite direction, the converse of viewing the work packages of the first level down of a work breakdown structure of a large project as contributing projects in their own right. Indeed, this view is reinforced by the definitions provided by the Project Management Institute ("PMI").

A Guide to the Project Management Body Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Fourth Edition defines *Program Management* as follows:[1]

> "The centralized coordinated management of a program to achieve the program's strategic objectives and benefits."

Where a *Program* is defined as:[2]

> "A group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually. Programs may include elements of related work outside of the scope of the discrete projects in the program."

These definitions place the *program manager* in a position to stop *project managers* from squabbling over shared resources. Other than that, we are not sure that these definitions are particularly helpful.

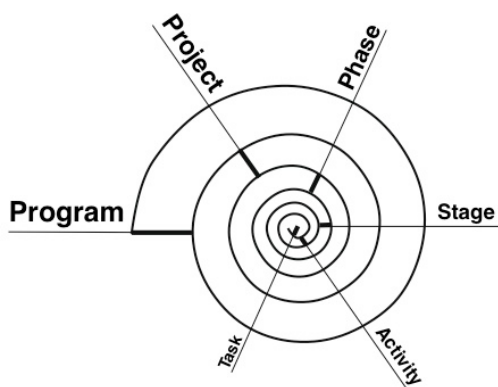Nevertheless, this overall idea is best illustrated by the graphic shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: The "Fractal" nature of project management[3]

For the uninitiated, a "fractal" may be defined as a series of self-similar shapes of varying size. Every shape in the series is geometrically similar. Many examples exist in the natural world, for example see Figure 2.

Figure 2: Sea shell illustrating fractal geometry in nature[4]

Notwithstanding, others have long since believed that program management *is* different, as illustrated by the following definition that encompasses a much broader spectrum:[5]

> "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
> - Resource allocation amongst a portfolio of projects."

We found that definition in 1999 and, since then, we have been looking for real-life examples of that broader purview.

Now, Dr. James T. Brown has come along with his book *The Handbook of Program Management* in which he demonstrates that program management can be very different. James is the President and CEO of SEBA® Solutions, Inc. He has sixteen years of experience with NASA, including hands-on experience as a project manager and an executive-level leader. He has received numerous awards for his project management contributions, including the NASA *Public Service Medal* and *Engineer of the Year* from the Cape Canaveral Technical Society.

From this experience, James is in a position to outline the differences between the roles of program managers and that of project managers. In fact he states right up front:[6]

> "The role of the program manager is very different from the role of project manager. The role of program manager is very complex; it can vary from managing multiple projects to managing multiple projects with operational responsibilities, in addition to being accountable for profit or cost targets linked to business strategy. Conversely, the project manager's role is to deliver the project within the cost and schedule constraints that are usually established at the program level."

Note particularly the program manager's responsibility for setting a project's cost and schedule constraints.

In his book James focuses on process and provides proven practices for establishing a successful program management culture, one that is supported enthusiastically by project stakeholders and project personnel alike. He shows how to develop the attributes of an effective program manager. This ranges from having a vision and strategy for long-term improvement, to assessing people and building relationships to analyzing a myriad of means for accomplishing a program's objectives.

This book does demonstrate that program management can be different – and not just a scaled-up

version of project management. So, if you aspire to move up to be a program manager, this may be just the book for you.

Book Structure

Following a brief Introduction, this book is simply laid out into ten chapters and a Glossary as follows:
1. Chaos to Clarity
2. Attributes of the Effective Program Manager
3. Stakeholder Management
4. Program Process Strategy
5. Program Execution Processes
6. Team Building at the Program Level
7. Program Communication Processes
8. Program Risk Management
9. Portfolio Management Essentials
10. Positive Program Outcomes
    Glossary

From this framework of chapter headings, it is evident that the contents of this book alerts the reader and provides techniques for:
- Adapting to changing business conditions and "turning chaos into clarity"
- Mentoring and coaching project managers in terms of stakeholder management
- Making strategic program process decisions that positively impact the corporate culture
- Building strong teams on multiple levels
- Planning an effective program execution, and
- Managing risk in the program environment of uncertainty

The reader will also observe that the emphasis of the book is on "process". In fact author James Brown states:[7]

> "The advantage – the competitive edge, leading companies seek – is process. Why is process important to a company and to program management? Just look at the nightly news. A month or a quarter doesn't go by without some widely recognized organization or company publicly acknowledging a major project disappointment. Additionally, the late-delivery and cost overruns of projects often cause turmoil and upheaval within organizations. That's why the ***companies that survive and thrive today and that will survive in the future will be those that have processes in place*** and can repeatedly integrate new people and new technology into their existing processes, thus producing superior products and services." (Emphasis added.)

Indeed, James goes on to emphasize the point by adding:[8]

> "While technology and people are definitely important, they are just inputs that support the process. Process allows an organization to exist ten years from now when most of the technology is different from today's and a good portion of the workforce has changed."

Not everyone will be comfortable with the thought that "they are just inputs", of course, but it is no doubt true. Many are the operations that simply fade away for lack of established processes when their owners fade away along with their personal management styles and techniques.

What we liked

This book is full of snippets of sound advice. For example this observation on "culture":
> "Creating the kind of culture in which the organization has a desire to please the leadership hinges on relationship building. The strategies that provide pain when there is a lack of discipline in the organization are also required. Both approaches are required to maximize success, because all people are not alike."[9]

Or this personality observation:
> "[T]he skill set and natural ability to become proficient in the use of project management software is different than the skill set and natural ability needed to be a great project manager, which is primarily people- and relationship-driven."[10]

Or this capability observation:
> "[W]hen people have dual responsibility, like operations and project management, they often gravitate to the one they are most comfortable with, sometimes to the expense of the other."[11]

However, for reasons that we will explain in our next section, we had to get well into Chapter 3 on the subject of Stakeholder Management before we began to warm to the book. It transpires that author James Brown's view of program management, or at least the role of a program manager, is largely one of salesmanship. For example, in Chapter 2 he says:[12]
> "As the main program champion, the program manager needs to garner resources and use his or her relationship capital to pave the way for the program to be successful. Relationship capital is the amount of influence a program manager can wield through the organization by establishing relationships of ever-increasing trust, internal and external to the organization. In this role as program champion, the program manager is always selling the program's importance to the company's stakeholders and team members."

We are very sympathetic to this point of view, even though it seems a far cry from the PMI-accepted view of program management. However, it is not until Chapter 3 that we learn how to fully identify who those stakeholders really are. In that regard James provides this valuable advice:[13]
> "To fully identify stakeholders, use the following guidelines:
> • Follow the money!
> • Follow the resources.
> • Follow the deliverables.
> • Follow the [required] signatures.
> • Examine other programs' stakeholder lists.
> • Review the organizational chart to assess which part of the organization may be stakeholders.
> • Ask team members, customers, and any other confirmed stakeholders to help you identify additional stakeholders.
> • Look for the 'Unofficial People of Influence' ".
> [Explanations of each omitted.]

James then goes on to describe different types of "problem" stakeholders in these terms:[14] "The meddling stakeholder; The overbearing stakeholder; The poor stakeholder; The untrustworthy stakeholder; The indecisive stakeholder; The unavailable stakeholder." He even adds (perish the thought) "I hope you never have a meddling, overbearing, poor, untrustworthy, indecisive stakeholder who is never available."[15] James then describes each in some detail with suggestions as to how to deal

with each type.

Other pieces of good advice include: "Don't get baited or caught in the trap of talking negatively about a particular stakeholder whether that party deserves it or not." Unfortunately, this reaction is quite common and very easy to do. Another: "Expect stakeholders to check up on you . . . [They] often ask questions they already know the answer to . . . They are simply testing [your] credibility."[16] And: "Program managers should also check up on how well [their] project managers are doing [their] stakeholder management by periodically (weekly or monthly or at milestones) calling each stakeholder and asking them how the project manager is doing and whether their [the stakeholder's] needs are being met."[17]

Given a number of projects in the program, the number of identified stakeholders and suggested frequency, this sounds like a full-time job in itself!

In Program Process Strategy, we were interested to see that under "How Project Managers Are Assigned" James advocates assigning project managers by phase.[18] He describes this "powerful strategy" this way:

> "Program managers should consider assigning project managers in the same way a baseball manager assigns pitchers. In other words, the most senior personnel can be used to kick off the project to ensure a good beginning. Once the requirements are established and baselined, a transition can occur to a more junior project manager capable of maintaining control for a project that has a good start. This transition has to be formal, with a 'sign-off' among the two project managers. The stakeholders must also be prepared for transition and may be included in the transition process. Once the transition is complete, the junior project manager may run the project until the project is ready to close. Then a switch can be made to a project manager who is more skilled or who specializes in closing projects.
>
> Closing out a project is vital. The experienced program manager should recognize that the skills required to start and organize a project, (herd and manage stakeholders), are different than the skills required to manage an established project, and are different than the skills needed to close a project."

This observation is entirely consistent with our own research.[19]

One of the longest chapters in the book deals with Program Execution Processes. Here we receive advice on a number of topical issues such as:
- The organizational leader who hears about Earned Value and wants to implement it immediately, only to discover that it requires a valid plan to be meaningful.[20]
- Effective project management means knowing what to ignore as well as what to pay attention to.[21]
- The critical path method will not produce a valid schedule in a resource-constrained environment.[22]
- Establishing an appropriate planning horizon – It is just common sense not to plan in detail or execute beyond your [visible] planning horizon.[23]
- [A better] way to accommodate a planning horizon that is shorter than project duration is to use 'rolling wave' scheduling.[24]
- Implement a stage gate process to ensure proper execution of the planned schedule [but] all projects within a program don't have to follow the same execution strategy.[25]

- You need to strike a balance between control and bureaucracy.[26]
- Your change management process should be designed so that it's intentionally cumbersome. I know that may not sound customer-friendly, but it is actually for the customer's own protection.[27]

These are all accompanied by good advice. But you'll have to read the book to find out why and how.

Downside

As is our custom with our book reviews, we started at the beginning, starting with the short introduction, and began to make notes on each page. Almost immediately, we began to fall over what we felt were rather sweeping and unsubstantiated statements. For example:
- "[C]ompanies that will survive the future will be those that have processes in place and can repeatedly integrate new people and new technology into their existing processes."[28]
- "[I]nnovation can still be a driving force for a company, but innovation without process is short-lived."[29]
- "More often than not, project failure is not the project manager's fault, although he or she is frequently blamed. The real cause of the failure is faulty program management."[30]

The question in mind in each case is: Is that all there is to it? But then, this is only in the introduction.

However, moving on into Chapter 1, we had trouble with the very first paragraph. For example:
- "The organization that can learn, change, adapt, and do so rapidly is destined for success."[31]

Our reaction: But not every organization is that sort of establishment and in any case it presumes that the "change" is fortuitously in the right direction.
- "These companies exist in this dysfunctional [chaotic] state because they do not have an effective program management structure in place.[32]

"Program management" frequently means different things to different people. Therefore, we were anxious to make sure that we understood the author's particular slant on this term. The book has a Glossary[33] but although Program Management is the subject of the book, this term is not defined. In any case, not every company has a program management department. But even if they do have several projects on the go, they do not necessarily need a program management department. After all, it is possible to be a program manager without a department, as we are sure the author would agree.
- "[T]ruly great program managers turn this chaos into clarity by creating a culture that facilitates success."[34]

This last statement contains four key words that are open to interpretation, namely: "chaos", "clarity", "culture" and "success". "Chaos" is defined as "A state of extreme confusion and disorder"[35] (Are there really that many companies that are that bad?) and "clarity" is defined as "Freedom from obscurity and ease of understanding".[36] True that "clarity" is explained more clearly several pages later. In reference to a program manager's perspective, clarity is described as "clear objectives for success, clear lines of accountability, and adherence to established processes".[37] However, the author's view of "culture" and "success" are not explained nor are they defined in the Glossary.

It is not until page 16 that we learn what the book is really about. As the author says:[38]

> "This book addresses project management policy from a program manager's perspective because the program manager is ultimately accountable for the delivery of the business objectives and adherence to the policy."

All well and good, but it seems to us that this is only true if the corporate body sees fit to establish a

corresponding position and mandate. In practice, the problem is that the position may or may not be called "Program Manager" and may or may not have a proactive mandate.

Another feature that we found disconcerting is the frequent use of "buzz" or "adapted" words that occur throughout the book. Terms appear such as "Ugly" (is the enemy of "clarity");[39] "presence" (the ability to appear or outwardly demonstrate the characteristics of a leader);[40] "self-regulating"[41] (defined later as having your team answer your questions before you ask them);[42] "whispering" (communicating information to a stakeholder under casual circumstances before it becomes publicly known);[43] "notifiers" (those who think that reporting the results arrived at by a computer software program is project management);[44] and "consistency" and "anchors";[45] "lens shaping";[46] and so on. We don't know if these are from common usage in the NASA culture that the author enjoyed in his previous employment, but they are not part of the accepted lexicon of project management.

Finally, we note that the author is an advocate of "Slow, Steady, Gentle Pressure" and that "Pressure works whether you are managing up or down." However, he does "not believe in deploying ***tremendous pressure***, because the subsequent stress levels can harm people and relationships"[47] (Emphasis added). Unfortunately, the book provides no guidance for determining the borderline between "gentle pressure" and "tremendous pressure".

Conclusion

In his closing thoughts, James suggests that:
> "Presence, relationship building, consistency, effective questioning, decision making, and mentoring are the program management leadership traits described in Chapter 2. The program manager also needs doggedness. Since programs are continual in nature, the program manager must persevere in good times and bad, all the while remaining focused on program objectives, improving the program's ability to execute, and increasing the capability of program personnel.
>
> At the program level, many of the problems you are trying to fix are entrenched in culture, process, and tradition. These problems are not easily or instantaneously fixed; rather, you must continually hammer them over a period of time before a breakthrough can be achieved."[48]

But in our earlier section "What we liked", we noted that:
> "Program managers should also check up on how well [their] project managers are doing stakeholder management by periodically (weekly or monthly or at milestones) calling each stakeholder and asking them how the project manager is doing and whether their [stakeholder's] needs are being met."[49]

With the foregoing responsibilities and obstacles, and this nearly full time job of checking up on how well project managers are doing in stakeholder management, one wonders why anyone would want to be such an overloaded program manager in the first place!

Except, perhaps, for the extra pay involved.

R. Max Wideman
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Author's response

As is our custom, we submitted a draft of our review for the author's consideration to ensure that we had not made any errors of fact. James Brown responded with enthusiasm to a number of issues adding further insights to this important and evolving topic.

The sea shell analogy

In response to our sea shell analogy, James suggested a very different interpretation, thus:

> "I would be in the group of others with regard to the Sea Shell adaptation as being representative of Program Management. The shell is more comprehensive if it is alive. Obviously the creature alive inside the shell represents the operations that must go on as all the projects proceed to improve those operations or spawn new operations. For example, I have a cruise line client that must implement a set of new projects up to including IT systems for new ships and modification of existing systems while operationally maintaining the existing systems. Ditto for my hospital client that may be rolling out a new robotic pharmacy dispenser and other projects while they are operationally operating the existing IT systems.

> The Space Shuttle Program has always had a program manager during development and operations. This is also similar to other large military and commercial programs where there is a program manager during development and a program manager once the system goes operational to manage the operations and the projects that improve the delivered system. The system is alive! Obviously as indicated you can have program managers without operational responsibility. The number of program managers with operational responsibility may be less only because they are usually higher in the organizational structure than those without operational responsibility."

Author's view of program management

Earlier, we suggested that James' view of program management "is a far cry from the PMI-accepted view of program management". James responded:

> "I do not disagree with the far cry statement above. The PMI accepted view is valid but just a piece of a complex puzzle when put in context with the real world. If it were as easy as implementing a standard or a methodology wouldn't all of our problems would be solved? I really emphasize salesmanship and relationship building because so many discount its importance. They tend to think that everything should be done with a methodology, logic and/or a governance model of some sort and tend to forget they are in a human system. People and organizations are far from logical.

> The dirty little secret in the project management community is the number of PMO's that have failed or been rendered powerless by their leadership. A lot of this is because of the inability to sell the leadership and the organization on what needs to get done. BTW you can have successful program and project management without a PMO. A PMO is just one way it can be done. As mentioned I believe in process…but just the right amount of process based on the organizational need. There is more than one right way to do program and project management.

> I hear so much whining by project managers that my leadership doesn't understand this or my leadership doesn't understand that and frankly it is not the leadership's problem it is

their problem. They have not "sold' the leadership on the correct course of action. Being right is not enough. These selling skills, knowledge of human behavior skills are necessary at the project level and even more important at the program level. To be effective you have to know what makes people change their mind – you have to know what creates buy in and commitment from the organization and must be proficient at using this knowledge in the context of your real world environment.

Meaning of "Chaos"
We stated that "Chaos" is defined as "State of extreme confusion and disorder" – and then asked: "Are there really that many companies that are that bad?" To this, James observed:
> "My experience based on observation and class participant comments is yes – there are many"

And promptly added evidence that, for obvious reasons, we are not at liberty to divulge!

Role of Program Manager
We suggested that "In practice, the problem is that the position may or may not be called "Program Manager" and may or may not have a proactive mandate." This prompted James to say:
> "I believe you can be in a program management position whether your organization chooses to call it that or not. Even if they call it that you may not have a mandate. It is up to you, title or not, mandate or not, to lead, prod, cajole and yes 'sell' the organization down the path of effective program management."

Program Manager's work overload
We expressed considerable concern over the work load with this observation: "Given a number of projects in the program, the number of identified stakeholders and suggested frequency, this sounds like a full-time job in itself!" To this, James makes the following recommendation:
> "Literally, yes, this can be perceived as and could be a full time job. But my assumption which I did not communicate well and will correctly clarify next time is that judgment must be applied here. Most program managers have project managers and stakeholders they have worked with awhile and have established relationships with and these do not need to be checked as frequently.
>
> Also, calling these stakeholders does not imply a long conversation. In fact a lot of times you will not even speak to them but leaving a voice message expressing your interest and concern. This is powerful and they do not have to call you back. Some projects are more important than others and some programs are more important than others. There is opportunity for prioritization. For large programs you can call a specified number at random a day.
>
> I am strong on this because a lot of leaders become very out of touch or are perceived as out of touch because they do not make these types of calls. These calls start the process for painless resolution of problems before they arise."

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[1] *A Guide to the Project Management Body Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Fourth Edition*, Project Management Institute, PA, 2008, p434

[2] Ibid

[3] Wideman, R. M., *A Management Framework for Project, Program and Portfolio Integration*, Trafford Publishing, 2004, Figure 5-3, p52