

Avoid These Leading Pitfalls of Program Management



How can organizations more consistently enjoy the benefits of superior program management? Start by avoiding these five leading program management pitfalls and instead embracing best practices.

Program managers are the orchestra conductors of business: leading often sizable yet finite resources through several complex and changing passages to achieve a set goal. Both roles also make a greater difference to the final results than many people might think.

A few years ago, [researchers studied](#) whether orchestra conductors really mattered. The verdict? Emphatically so. In fact, the study found the more a conductor's influence, the better the music.

Similarly, quality program managers make a positive difference. Organizations with great program managers have far higher project success rates (92 percent on average), more successful business outcomes and waste less money due to poor project performance than organizations with substandard program management, according to the [Project Management Institute](#).

How can organizations more consistently enjoy the benefits of superior program management? Start by avoiding these five leading program management pitfalls and instead embracing best practices.

1. **Pitfall: Recent leadership changes** – Successful programs need leadership champions to not only make the business case and define the desired outcome for a program, but also visibly and emphatically support the

program team's efforts, especially during times of uncertainty. Leadership changes can potentially imperil a program if the new leaders have other priorities or are uninformed about or unaligned with the desired outcome. **Best practice: Strong leadership support and involvement** – Since a major program will typically entail change of some kind, remember the single greatest success factor in change management is strong leadership support and involvement. A frequent commonality in failed change efforts is leaders who abdicate their personal responsibility for change leadership. Instead, leaders should articulate a strong and steady vision for the program's outcome, delineate a path for execution and resist requests to tweak plans due to small missteps.

2. **Pitfall: Overlapping roles and responsibilities** – Program management, by definition oversight of multiple related projects, is fraught with potential for “too many cooks in the kitchen.” This can occur when roles and responsibilities for leaders and team members are not clearly documented and communicated, at the expense of the program. Leaders, innocently or not, will try to fill in gaps and step on others' toes, resulting in a confused, ill-run program. **Best practice: Clear roles and responsibilities** – Equipped with a well-defined program structure, governance model and leadership structure, an organization should be able to readily determine the correct amount of dedicated resources needed to fulfill the program. To maximize resource productivity and minimize waste, clearly define and communicate to internal leaders, consultants and other vendors all roles and responsibilities for the program.
3. **Pitfall: Multiple program scope revisions** – Anyone who has driven in stop-and-go traffic can attest to the frustration of the experience. It's time-consuming, wasteful of resources and harmful to both the health of your vehicle and you. Similarly, stop-and-go re-scoping of a program as work progresses can mean added time, wasted resources, potential rework and frustrated team members. **Best practice: Clear program scope** – Having strong, positive leadership will almost invariably result in a clear program scope, objectives and outcomes. Yet leadership alone should not solely dictate this path. To ensure engagement from program stakeholders, capture their input up-front, weave it into your objectives and priorities, and keep them apprised on progress. Engage stakeholders as issues arise and decisions need to be made to ensure scope alignment.
4. **Pitfall: Weak financial oversight** – A quality program's metrics should regularly include a financial management component comparing the program's budgeted time and money versus time and money actually spent. Similarly, pay attention to unforeseen delivery costs. If a program lacks a financial management process and monitoring metric, or if this information is poorly managed, trouble will ensue. **Best practice: Sound financial oversight and management** – Given the scope, scale and cost of most large-scale programs, keen financial oversight and management is a must. Besides having fundamental standards for the budget process, estimates and financial controls, proactively maintain sound finances. This includes developing relevant key performance indicators and keeping all parties informed and accountable. It also means having the flexibility to account for financial surprises, within parameters, and re-visiting and

re-forecasting the budget, as needed.

5. **Pitfall: Competing priorities** – Rare is the organization with few competing internal priorities. For most, the reality is an ongoing risk of program dilution in which resources are pulled away for other initiatives. The problem is that the negative effect of these competing priorities is cumulative. Days or even hours of team members diverted elsewhere can add up. **Best practice: Alignment on program priorities** – Program leadership should convey the program’s purpose – what it is meant to achieve, solve or resolve. Weaker leaders often solely focus on the “what” of programs; stronger leaders detail both the “what” and “why” and connect it to the organization’s values, creating stronger program buy-in. In addition, make pertinent internal and external audiences, including vendors, partners and potentially even customers or clients, aware of the program’s objective, execution steps and planned outcomes.

In Summary

While program managers and orchestra conductors both strive for seamless, high-quality performances, in practice only conductors will likely receive a rousing round of applause for the overall efforts exerted. No matter. The greatest reward of premier program management comes in maximizing the program benefits realized by the sponsoring organization.