

Project or Programme Management?

An important strategic decision to make during the Initiation of a Project or Programme is to decide which of the two management approaches you should employ for the work in hand; Project or Programme Management? Make the wrong decision and you could be sounding the death knell for the initiative.

If you manage a piece of work which clearly should be run as a programme and instead run it as you would a project, you will soon lose control of the work and confusion will surely follow; you (and others) will also lose confidence in your abilities and judgment as a manager. If you run a piece of work as a programme when it clearly should be run as a project you are still likely to have a failure on your hands due, at least in part, to an excessive process overhead which again will erode confidence in you as a manager.

The question isn't so much "is it a project or a programme?", but rather "which management technique should be used – project or programme management?"

It is a truism that the foundation is set for success or failure of a project or programme of work in the early identification and initiation stages. Experienced project /programme managers will often describe this decision making process (project or programme management?) as an amalgam of experience, skill and perhaps a smattering of serendipity.

Before you can choose which management process to follow you need to have an understanding of the characteristics of projects and programmes. There are many definitions for these two entities; the one's that follow are typical examples:

Project

A project is a one-off temporary organisation initiated and coordinated in such a way as to deliver through an assigned pool of resource a range of designated outputs and benefits to a definable set of customers in accordance with a specific business case. All project outputs will be typically delivered in accordance with a well defined set of project drivers such as Quality, Time, Cost and Scope. With respect to time a project is likely to have a lifespan with a typical duration of less than 12 months.

Programme

A programme is defined as a temporary and flexible organisation created to coordinate the initiation of an agreed group of projects and their associated resource in order to deliver a range of designated outcomes and benefits to a definable set of customers in accordance with the projects individual business cases and the strategic objectives of the organisation the programme is serving. Projects in a programme, as against a portfolio, are distinguished by the fact that cross dependencies exist between projects. A programme is likely to have a loosely defined life span that is likely to have duration of several years

Ultimately, the decision on what type of management approach to take will depend on your view of the work in hand. There are many factors that will contribute to the decision.

The following check list will help in answering the question:

"Which management technique should be used – project or programme management?"

Project	Indicative Factor	Programme
Low	What is the degree of complexity of the change?	High
Small	What is the scale of the change?	Large
No	Are the strategic objectives are hard to define?	Yes
No	Are resources scarce?	Yes
Low	What is the potential for utilising common activities or products across projects?	High
No	Are periodic significant step changes in capability feasible?	Yes
Low	What is the probability of change during the execution of the work?	High
Low	What degree of uncertainty is prevalent?	High
One/Few	Are there a number of outcomes expected?	Many
No	Will there be efficiency &/or effectiveness improvements?	Yes
Yes	Is the main focus on Time, Quality, Cost, and Scope constraints?	No
Partially	Is the main focus on outcomes and benefits?	Solely
Heavily	Does the Business Case focus around a specific completion date?	Not at all
Indirectly	Does the work align to the organisations strategic objectives?	Directly
No	Will the work require resources from several internal departments?	Yes
No	Will the work require external resources?	Yes
Low	What is the level of commitment from senior management?	High
Low	What level of management is the Sponsor?	High
Yes	Is the work to be carried out in one location?	No
No	Will the deliverables be rolled out to different locations?	Yes
No	Does the work include changing people attitudes?	Yes
No	Does the work include changing working conditions?	Yes
Simple	Is there a complicated journey from 'as-is' to 'to-be'?	Complex
Minor	Will there be changes to operational business processes?	Major
No	Will BAU transition tasks be needed to imbed the change?	Yes

Table 1

Table 1 is designed as a very subjective starting point to help you decide whether you should adopt a programme or project management approach to managing the work in hand. You will most likely find that in many cases you will want to choose a middle ground when rating the various 'Indicative Factors'. Simply, the more your answers are weighted to the left hand column, the more likely it is that you should adopt a Programme Management approach; and if the weighting is mostly on the right, then a Project Management approach is likely to be more appropriate.

You will in all probability want to add, remove or revise the 'Indicative Factors' so that they fit more closely to your own environment.

Once selected, make sure that the correct project methodology or programme framework is adopted and followed by the whole team. You should ensure that the management products required to be delivered during this formative stage are aligned immediately to this approach i.e. the Project or Programme Mandate, Business Case, Vision and the Project or Programme Brief.

As mentioned earlier in this article, you will need to use your experience, skill, and common sense to finally decide which management approach to use, but this article should give you a good starting point.

About the Author:

Graham Fincham is a member of the Association for Project Management (APM), the Project Management Institute (PMI), the International Association for Project & Program Management (IAPPM), and the American Academy of Project Management (AAPM).

He holds several highly respected programme and project management qualifications including MSP Advanced Practitioner, PMP and APMP.

Graham has more than 25 years of experience in programme and project management disciplines. He has spent much of his career working within large organisations and is highly skilled at understanding cultural issues and implementing corporate systems.