Rules a Program Manager Can Live By
Getting Back to the Basics

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Program managers who focus on customers, money, and common sense are more likely to succeed than those who do not. This article offers 10 basic steps toward better program management that emphasize those three points of focus.

With acquisition reform, reengineering, downsizing, rightsizing, and old-fashioned turmoil, a lot of interest from public and private sectors now focuses on how we, as program managers, do business. Because of this increased focus and interest, many organizations are attempting to quantify what they do.

In response to this growing interest, my experience and that of many other program managers tells me we need to get back to the basics:

- What are we doing?
- How are we doing?
- How do we know?

Instituting planning charts, financial summary charts, and color-coded risk and status charts are not by themselves marks of progress. The team must understand and use the material. To do that, we need to employ the basics—planning a solid program using common sense and sound management techniques.

Some organizations appear to have lost sight of that. They are doing solid planning from a technical perspective but not applying those same disciplined techniques to the business side. The tools we use to plan, organize, and evaluate should be just that—tools ... but not an end in themselves. The rules that follow are not new, exciting, or particularly insightful, but they work, and may help you avoid some of the problems and pitfalls in getting the job done.

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Step 1 – Do Not Try to Impress People by Building a Better Mousetrap

In trying to express this concept in ways that are new and different, words fail me. Tired old phrases come to mind such as "Don't reinvent the wheel," and "Don't fix what isn't broken"—neither of which is likely to hold anyone's attention. Regrettably, there is no fascinating way to say what we all know to be true: The institutional resistance (inertia) of "not invented here" needs to be addressed upfront. Think about it. Why not borrow a good idea from another office, give the originator credit, improve the process or idea, and move on? This is much more efficient and productive than trying to come up with that one "brilliant idea" yourself.

With this philosophy in mind, keep an eye out for good ideas in your organization. As the old saying goes, "You'd be surprised what you can accomplish if you don't mind who gets the credit." So see what works, and keep it. If what you are doing or what you have tried is not working, start with Step 2.

Step 2 – Know Who the Customer Really Is

The customer is the one who is putting up the financial resources, right? Most of the time. As an example, the customer for U.S. Air Force fighters and bombers is the Air Combat Command (ACC). But when it comes to developing requirements, the acquisition community is ACC's customer. If the war fighter's requirements are not nailed down, how can you acquire a system that they will be happy with? Moreover, if the requirements constantly change and customers do not seem to know what they want, we have "requirements creep." And depending on who is in the meeting, requirements creep may be a noun or a verb.

Once your customer has understandable and definitive requirements, you must know what the cost, schedule, and performance parameters are and baseline the program. Without it, you will not be able to communicate what is required to successfully fulfill the requirement, and others will not know what to expect in return. Put another way, a baseline serves as the vehicle to establish and track a common set of expectations. When developing a program baseline that incorporates cost, schedule, and performance, do not forget that your project integrates with many other products and processes such as training, spare parts, or maintenance equipment.

Some people develop a baseline as a document. I like to think of it as a set of briefing charts (which helps me stifle my verbosity). Perhaps you will find, as I did, that most of the benefit of a simple baseline document (I recommend keeping it to six to eight charts) is in building it and coordinating with all the affected agencies, including the customer. As a forcing function, the baseline applies discipline in bringing

the program together and ensures that its strategy is supportable.

Step 3 – Get a Second Opinion

Suppose you went to the doctor for a standard check-up and received a dire prognosis. You would likely seek a second opinion. Likewise, if your program receives word that it has a sudden illness, but it seems fine, get a second opinion. I know of a program manager who went ballistic after hearing that a piece of government-furnished equipment (GFE) was not going to be available for his program. After being yelled at by the customer, he finally had to elevate it to his supervisor. The supervisor then called a different "expert" point of contact and found there was plenty of the GFE item available.

The lesson to be learned from this true situation again takes us back to the basics. When things unexpectedly look bad, get a second opinion. The same is true for those times when you believe things are headed the wrong direction and your single point of contact says, "Don't worry, be happy"—get that second opinion.

Step 4 – Realize All Software Development Is Moderate Risk

"What you see is not always what you get" is a general rule of software development. Although debugging and testing a program may reveal many hidden problems, these actions alone cannot guarantee that all problems are detected. Historically, software has proven itself difficult to scope and insidiously susceptible to requirements growth. Keep this axiom in mind: "The more complex your solution, the more vulnerable it is to simple problems." Be wary of magicians who claim that previously discovered hardware problems can be fixed with a simple software modification. One senior program director once told me his rule of thumb: No matter where you are in software development, you are always two years behind schedule and need twice as much money. Expect it, plan for it, and manage it.

Step 5 – Know Your Program's Status

Many organizations use color codes to communicate the status of the project. I have always been fascinated by the variety of definitions and the finite detail program managers use and confuse to define whether a program, project, or functional area is "green," "yellow," or "red." Depending on the management philosophy of the organization, green, yellow, or red is usually the program manager's assessment.

For example, problem N may be coded different colors by different program managers. If the program is one month behind, do you evaluate it red, yellow, or green? The color depends on when the customer needs it. Following are three simple definitions to consider when preparing color-coded future assessments.

- If the program or project fills your day, keeps you challenged, and is a reason why they need you in government service, the program is green.
- If you ponder the day's events on the drive home and know that your boss will be irritated to hear from someone other than you about the latest "fun" you are having, the program is yellow.
- If you find yourself waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night considering other employment options, hoping that your boss can help you fix all the problems, the program is red.

Step 6 – Follow the Money

Everything you do is connected to money, and if you did not control the funding no one would pay any attention to you. Start thinking of financial planning documents as program management planning documents because that is what they are. Always be familiar with your financial situation. For example, I have seen unintentional problems arise when several functional areas believed they were entitled to the same chunk of money but did not talk to each other about who really owned it. If you depend on too many good things to happen to be successful, you probably will not be. If you are not managing the money, you are not managing the program. That is always the bottom line.

Step 7 – Summarize Meetings

Have you ever sat through a one-hour meeting listening to all the attendees speak their mind? At the end of the meeting, with 15 suggestions from six people, it is difficult to know who plans to do what unless the program manager summarizes for the group what the course of action will be. If, at the end of your meeting, you have not summarized a plan of action, you might find yourself rescheduling another meeting. Get into the habit of summarizing each meeting and save time, effort, and a lot of headaches down the road.

Step 8 – Use the "Aunt Agnes" Test

A situation develops that requires you, the program manager, to make a decision. But does the course of action you are about to select make sense? In acquisition, we have surrounded ourselves with processes, integrated acronym lists (IAL), and program management review teams, all of which can deprive us of our common sense.

I have been taught to use this simple test: Pretend you have an Aunt Agnes who owns a farm in Iowa, where she grows corn. Can you explain the program and your decision to her? Would she understand it? Does it make sense? Can you defend the course of action to her? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," rethink your strategy because you are about to lose your way. And do not bother look up IAL—I made that up to show how unnecessary complexity will only confuse Aunt Agnes and your customer.

Step 9 – Make a Decision

We have all sat through meetings where a detailed, insightful discussion about the pros and cons of a project occurred to the nth degree. But in the end, no one knew what course of action to which the program manager

agreed. What did he want? Did she say, go ahead? The difference between the program manager and a lot of process-oriented staff help is that you are required to make decisions. Do not forget that. If you do, you will be without a job.

Sometimes no decision is the worst decision. Be careful not to get caught in this type of organizational paralysis. One senior leader once advised that "you need to go into the job assuming you have already been fired—only then will you be willing to make the right decisions." Take in the important details, look at the alternatives, understand the options, then make a decision and move on.

Step 10 – Manage, Do Not Micromanage

Stay focused on the goals and ideas that are important to you, and stick to the basics. Watch the details without micromanaging your team. You cannot always be there to answer the questions, so make sure your team knows what is going on. Treat everyone with respect. And have fun.

Being a program manager is a lot like being a utility infielder in baseball. You know what will make your effort successful, and you have a team of functional experts to help you along the way. Let them know what you expect from them, and chances are they will not let you down. Remember, these jobs are 10 percent expertise and 90 percent common sense. To win the game, stick to the basics, focus on your goal, and rely on teamwork.

Keep It Simple

You do not get paid more for making it complicated, so stick to the basics. The tools for becoming a more effective program manager that I have outlined in this article are quite simple. Every one of us has thought of them, but the working process can still be confusing. When you think you are losing control of a project, check to see if you are following these tips. Chances are you will quickly recognize how to fix it. ◆

About the Author

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