THE PROGRAM - PROJECT DANCE:

WHY GETTING THIS RELATIONSHIP RIGHT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Last week, I watched a heated exchange between a program manager and a project manager that perfectly illustrates why so many organizations struggle with complex initiatives. The project manager was frustrated because "the program keeps changing requirements and moving goalposts." The program manager was equally frustrated because "the projects aren't delivering the strategic outcomes we need."

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Both were right. Both were wrong. And both were missing the fundamental point about how program and project management should work together.

Here's what I've learned after working with dozens of organizations trying to deliver complex, multi-project initiatives: when program and project management work well together, magic happens. When they don't, even the best individual projects can add up to strategic failure.

If you're a project manager who's never worked closely with program management, or a leader trying to understand why your multi-project initiatives keep falling short of expectations, this conversation is for you.

The Organizational Angle: Two Different Operating Systems

Let's start with the hard truth: program management and project management operate at fundamentally different organizational levels, and that's exactly how it should be.

Project management is about delivery excellence. It's focused on scope, time, cost, and quality within defined boundaries. Project managers are optimizing for successful completion of specific deliverables. They need clarity, stable requirements, and the authority to make trade-offs within their project boundaries.

Program management is about strategic realization. It's focused on benefits, outcomes, and organizational change across multiple initiatives. Program managers are optimizing for strategic value delivery, which often means accepting project-level inefficiencies to achieve program-level effectiveness.

The Praxis® framework captures this beautifully in its distinction between project and program contexts. Projects exist within a defined scope with clear success criteria. Programs exist within a strategic context where success criteria evolve as learning occurs and organizational needs shift.

Here's where it gets interesting from an organizational perspective: most companies try to manage programs like big projects. They want the same level of predictability, the same detailed upfront planning, and the same linear execution approach. This fundamental misunderstanding creates most of the friction between program and project managers.

What this means practically: Program managers need to give project managers enough stability to execute effectively, while project managers need to accept that some level of scope evolution is inherent to program success. The key is making this tension productive rather than destructive.

The People Angle: Different Personalities, Complementary Strengths

Program managers and project managers often have very different personality profiles, and understanding these differences is crucial for effective collaboration.

Project managers tend to be detail-oriented, process-focused, and comfortable with concrete deliverables. They derive satisfaction from completion and closure. They're often natural problem-solvers who enjoy the tactical challenge of execution.

Program managers tend to be strategic thinkers, comfortable with ambiguity, and focused on long-term outcomes. They derive satisfaction from organizational impact and change. They're often natural relationship-builders who enjoy the complexity of stakeholder management.

These differences can create natural tension, but they're also complementary strengths when leveraged properly. The project manager's focus on execution excellence keeps the program grounded in reality. The program manager's strategic perspective ensures that excellent execution adds up to meaningful outcomes.

What great working relationships look like: The

program manager protects the project manager from strategic uncertainty and stakeholder noise, while the project manager provides the program manager with reliable delivery capability and early warning about execution risks.

I've seen this work beautifully when a program manager acts as a "strategic umbrella" for their project managers, filtering and translating strategic changes into actionable project guidance. Meanwhile, project managers provide the program manager with honest, detailed feedback about what's actually possible given real-world constraints.

The Technology Angle: Integration Challenges and Opportunities

Technology programs are where the program-project dynamic becomes most complex and most critical. Individual technology projects might deliver perfectly functional solutions that don't integrate well or don't achieve the intended business outcomes.

From a project perspective, success looks like delivering working software on time and on budget that meets specified requirements. From a program

perspective, success looks like achieving business transformation through integrated technology capabilities.

The Praxis framework addresses this through its emphasis on benefits realization planning at the program level. While projects focus on delivering outputs (working systems), programs focus on enabling outcomes (changed business capabilities) and realizing benefits (improved business performance).

Real-world example: I worked with a financial services company that delivered six separate technology projects perfectly – new CRM, updated data warehouse, mobile app, API platform, reporting system, and customer portal. Each project met its individual success criteria. But customers still couldn't get a unified view of their accounts because the program-level integration architecture was never properly defined or managed.

The project managers had optimized for individual project success. The program manager should have been optimizing for integrated solution success. The disconnect happened because they weren't clear about their respective responsibilities for technical architecture and integration.

What this means practically: Project managers need to understand and design for program-level integration requirements, even when it makes their individual projects more complex. Program managers need to define and maintain architectural coherence across projects, even when it constrains individual project flexibility.

The Communication Angle: Information Flow and Decision Rights

One of the biggest sources of friction between program and project management is unclear communication protocols and decision rights. Who decides what, when, and how is information shared up and down the hierarchy?

From a project manager's perspective, they need clear requirements, stable scope, and quick decisions on changes that affect their project. They're operating in execution mode where delays in decision-making directly impact delivery.

From a program manager's perspective, they need complete visibility into project progress, risks, and interdependencies. They're operating in coordination mode where

information delays can cascade across multiple projects.

The challenge is that these needs are often in tension. Project managers want to shield their teams from program-level uncertainty. Program managers need transparency into project-level details to manage program risks.

The Praxis approach: Clear governance structures with defined decision authorities and communication protocols. The framework emphasizes that program managers should focus on "what" and "why" while project managers focus on "how" and "when."

What works in practice: Regular, structured communication rhythms with clear agendas. Weekly project status focused on delivery metrics. Monthly program reviews focused on strategic progress. Quarterly stakeholder updates focused on benefits realization. And most importantly, immediate escalation protocols for issues that cross project boundaries.

The Risk and Issue Management Angle: Shared Responsibility, Different Focus

Risk management is where the program-project relationship gets really interesting. Risks exist at both levels, but they require different approaches and different responses.

Project risks are typically tactical – resource availability, technical complexity, scope creep, vendor performance. Project managers are well-equipped to identify, assess, and mitigate these risks within their project boundaries.

Program risks are typically strategic – market changes, organizational capacity, benefit assumptions, interdependency failures. These risks often can't be mitigated at the project level and require program-level intervention.

The challenge is that project-level risks can become program-level risks, and program-level risks often manifest as project-level issues. Effective risk management requires clear handoff protocols and shared responsibility.

What I've seen work: Project managers own tactical risk identification and mitigation within their projects, but they escalate risks that could affect other projects or program outcomes. Program managers own strategic risk assessment and response, but they work with project managers to implement risk mitigation actions.

Real-world example: A retail transformation program had individual projects for inventory management, point-of-sale systems, and customer loyalty programs. Each project manager was managing their technical risks effectively. But the program manager identified a strategic risk that customer behavior changes during the transition period could affect all three projects. This required coordinated response planning across all projects – something no individual project manager could handle alone.

The Success Measurement Angle: Different Definitions, Aligned Goals

Here's where many organizations get confused: project success and program success are measured differently, but they need to be aligned.

Project success is typically measured by the iron triangle – scope, time, cost – plus quality metrics. Did we deliver what we said we would, when we said we would, for the budget we agreed to?

Program success is measured by benefits realization – did we achieve the strategic outcomes we set out to achieve? Are stakeholders better off than they were before? Did we create the organizational capabilities we intended?

The Praxis framework emphasizes this distinction through its benefits management processes. Projects deliver outputs that enable outcomes, but programs are responsible for ensuring that outcomes actually occur and benefits are realized.

The practical challenge: A program can have all projects succeed individually but still fail to achieve strategic objectives. Conversely, a program can achieve strategic success even if some individual projects face challenges or need to be modified.

What this means for working relationships: Project managers need to understand how their project outputs contribute to program outcomes, not just deliver to specification. Program managers need to support project managers in making trade-offs that optimize for program success, not just project success.

The Stakeholder Management Angle: Coordinated Engagement

Stakeholder management is perhaps the most complex aspect of the program-project relationship because stakeholders exist at multiple levels with different interests and expectations.

Project stakeholders are typically focused on specific deliverables and their immediate impact. They want to know when they'll get their new system, what it will do, and how it will affect their daily work.

Program stakeholders are typically focused on strategic outcomes and organizational change. They want to know if the investment is generating expected returns, whether strategic objectives are being met, and what the long-term implications are.

The challenge is that many stakeholders exist at both levels. A business unit leader might be a project stakeholder for a new system implementation and a program stakeholder for overall digital transformation.

What works: Clear stakeholder mapping with defined engagement protocols. Project managers handle tactical stakeholder communication about their specific deliverables. Program managers handle strategic stakeholder communication about overall progress and outcomes. But

both need to coordinate to ensure consistent messaging and avoid stakeholder confusion.

The Change Management Angle: Individual vs. Organizational Change

Change management is where the program-project distinction becomes most critical because individual projects create specific changes while programs create organizational transformation.

Project-level change management focuses on adoption of specific deliverables – training users on new systems, updating procedures, communicating about new processes. It's tactical and immediate.

Program-level change management focuses on organizational capability development and cultural change – helping the organization develop new ways of working, building change capacity, ensuring strategic alignment. It's strategic and long-term.

The integration challenge: Individual project changes need to add up to coherent organizational change. This requires coordination that

often falls between program and project management responsibilities.

What I've seen work: Program managers own the overall change strategy and organizational readiness, while project managers own specific change activities for their deliverables. But success requires constant coordination to ensure individual changes support the overall transformation.

Making It Work in Practice: The Keys to Success

Based on working with organizations that do this well, here are the practical keys to effective program-project collaboration:

❀ **Clear role definition using frameworks like Praxis:** Everyone understands what program management does versus what project management does, and where the handoffs occur.

❀ **Structured communication rhythms:** Regular, predictable communication between program and project levels with clear agendas and decision points.

❀ **Integrated planning processes:** Project plans that roll up into program plans, with clear dependencies and integration points identified.

❀ **Shared success metrics:** Project success measures that align with and contribute to program success measures.

❀ **Escalation protocols:** Clear processes for moving issues between project and program levels based on scope and impact.

❀ **Mutual respect and understanding:** Recognition that both levels are essential and that tension between them can be productive when managed well.

The Praxis Advantage: Best Practices for Both Worlds

This is where the Praxis framework really shines. Unlike methodologies that focus on either project or program management, Praxis provides integrated best practices that work across both domains.

Praxis recognizes that programs and projects exist in a hierarchy of value creation, with each level optimizing for different outcomes while contributing to overall strategic success. The framework provides clear guidance on roles, responsibilities, processes, and integration points.

More importantly, Praxis is built on the principle that effective management practices scale across complexity levels. The same fundamental principles apply whether you're managing a simple project or a complex program, but the application differs based on context.

✿ **For project managers:** Praxis provides a clear path for understanding how your projects contribute to program success and how to optimize for program-level value, not just project-level delivery.

✿ **For program managers:** Praxis provides structured approaches for coordinating multiple projects while maintaining focus on strategic outcomes and benefits realization.

✿ **For organizations:** Praxis provides the integrated governance structures needed to make program-project relationships productive rather than contentious.

The framework's emphasis on competency development is particularly valuable because it recognizes that effective program and project managers need different but complementary skill sets. You can develop both within a coherent professional development framework.

Ready to Transform Your Program-Project Dynamics?

If you're struggling with the program-project relationship in your organization, or if you're a project manager curious about how program management could enhance your strategic impact, we'd love to explore this with you.

Every organization's program-project challenges are unique, requiring careful assessment of current practices, stakeholder dynamics, and strategic objectives. But the fundamental principles of effective collaboration remain consistent across industries and contexts.

Book a free consultation with our Design Thinking Pros team to discuss your specific program-project challenges and opportunities. We'll help you assess your current state, identify improvement opportunities, and develop practical solutions that work in your organizational context.

Whether you're looking to implement program management practices, improve existing program-project coordination, or develop your team's capabilities in both domains, we can help you create the collaborative relationships that turn complex initiatives into strategic success.

Because at the end of the day, organizations that master the

program-project relationship don't just deliver projects successfully – they achieve transformation efficiently and sustainably.

Ready to make your program-project relationships work better? Book your free consultation today and let's discuss how to create the collaboration that drives strategic success.