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Role of Program Manager versus Project Manager

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A common myth about the role of the program manager is that he or she "wears a bigger and wider hat" to be able to manage large, multiple projects. In reality, the program manager should also wear different pairs of glasses that provide different perspectives and enable program managers to see things differently than project managers. To be successful in a program environment, program managers have to balance between multiple perspectives.

The following perspectives will help you better understand the role of a program manager versus a project manager:

Engineering versus architecture – A helpful analogy to think about is the role of engineering, which deals with detailed planning, versus architecture, which deals with design elements. Project managers are more like engineers, while program managers have to think more like architects. Architecture focuses on the vision through form, function and design, while engineering provides the structure and mechanism to enable the vision.

Program managers should focus on the vision of the program and how they can design the program architecture – select, prioritize, link and align the projects within the program along with their structural dependencies to help in achieve the optimum benefits of the program.

Tactical versus strategic – The project manager role is more tactical. It is centered on completing tasks, completing specific deliverables and meeting specifications on time and within budget. The program manager role is more strategic. It focuses on the big picture and is measured by the implementation and fulfillment of a strategy and realization of benefits like growth, productivity or bottom line results.

Project versus operations and business – The project manager, by definition, is focused on the end date of the project. The program manager must think beyond the end date of the individual projects to the transitional and operational elements as well.

A typical program may have operational elements as a part of the overall program environment. The project manager is responsible for tasks, deliverables and outputs of the project. As program manager, you often must "wear the hat of a businessperson" because you are responsible to see how the projects within the program result in business benefits.

Management and coordination versus leadership and facilitation – Project managers manage and coordinate tasks and activities. They are team players who may contribute to deliverables and motivate through use of knowledge and skills.

Program managers provide leadership and vision. They play the role of facilitators and mentors who can inspire and guide project managers and their teams to achieve the strategic goals of the programs.

While you contemplate the role of a program manager, you should also think about the three themes elaborated in the Project Management Institute's *Standard Practice for Program Management:* stakeholder management, benefits management and governance. These themes provide additional perspective on the program management role:

1. Benefits Management

- Assesses the value and organizational impact of the program

- Identifies the interdependencies of benefits being delivered among various projects within the program

- Ensures that targeted benefits are SMART (specific, measurable, approved, realistic and time-based).

- Analyzes the potential impact of planned program changes on benefits outcome

- Assigns responsibilities and accountability for the actual benefits required from the program.