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## Projects & programs are two different animals, don't underestimate the gap

Thomas Walenta, PMI Fellow, PgMP, PMP\*

*Im Pfloeckgarten 42, 55546 Hackenheim, Germany*

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### Abstract

Surveys show that a major reason of project failure is the lack of benefits management. Even when projects are delivered in time and budget, they fail to create the expected benefits. Benefits management is not a knowledge area covered by project management, but it is the key domain for program management. Five differences between project and program management are explored and these explanations can be used to promote the idea of separating program and project management within an organization. Very often organizations do not understand the differences and so put burdens on a project and a project manager, which are not achievable. While some local heroes still manage to wear both hats, and deliver successfully, this is not a sustainable model for large organizations and for all organization to achieve higher levels of project management maturity. The five differences are:

1. project management standards do not embrace the concept of benefits
2. education and training for project manager does not include program management skills
3. capabilities of successful project managers differ from those of successful program managers
4. a project does not ensure benefits, it creates deliverables, which might or might not result in benefits
5. project managers are inward oriented, while program managers are more dealing with the outside

An example is given, how the author morphed from being a project to a program manager. Not every project manager has the personal disposal for this transformation. In fact, most program managers have not pursued a project management career before.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49-171-3358938.

*E-mail address:* [thwalenta@online.de](mailto:thwalenta@online.de)

## 1. The differences between Lions and Elephants

Lions are the 'king of the animals' and quick killers (see Figure 1). They are living in families called prides and live for about 12 years in the wild. Lions hunt in teams mostly led by females for prey, they also eat dead meat if they are not successful in their hunts (more than 50% of all cases). Their hunts are limited to short bursts of sprints, otherwise they are stalking for prey. Humans respect and fear lions, there are man-eaters, and the Romans used lions in their arenas to kill Christians and criminals in a cruel but efficient way. Despite this image of might and power, Lions have not been trained to be used for warfare.

In a way, project managers could be characterized as lions: they work in teams, are efficient, can achieve results in short term, but are not always successful. The best are well respected. They usually are not consulted when it comes to strategy implementation.

Elephants are respected and useful for strategic initiatives. They were heavily used in warfare by Indian, Persian and Roman armies, as well as by the famous Hannibal from Carthage. Elephants are plant eaters and like to live close to waters, they can live for 70 years. Elephants are characterized by living in large families, having good long-term memories and caring for each other. Occasionally, Elephants attack and kill humans but in general they are regarded as friendly and peaceful animals.

Like Program Managers, Elephants have been used for strategy implementation, they are respected, work in teams, exhibit a longer timeframe in age and social life and are effective.

Like lions and elephants, Project and Program Managers are not just flavors of the same species. While we agree that lions and elephant are indeed different animals, we still see the perception that project managers and program managers are the same species, just with slight differences in experience and skills. And some say if you push project managers enough, they will transform into program managers and the organization will receive the benefits it longs for. This is not true in general, as we will see from the following paragraphs.



Fig. 1. Though Lions and Elephants are both attacking animals, they have different capabilities und usage scenarios, similar to project and program managers

## 2. Benefits are not being delivered even in successful projects

Project and program success rates are (still) not satisfactory. PMI's Pulse of the Profession Survey 2014 (Ref 1 PMI's Pulse of the Profession Survey 2014) suggests 44% of strategic initiatives are unsuccessful and more than 10% of project budgets are wasted. Other studies support these dimensions of failure, and this is true for the past decades. PMI's Survey further states as current main reasons for the shortfalls:

- Lack of alignment with organizational strategy

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