Exploring program management competences for various program types ☆

Maxim Miterev [a,b,*], Mats Engwall [a], Anna Jerbrant [a]

[a] *Department of Industrial Economics and Management, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Lindstedtsvägen 30, SE-100 44 Stockholm, Sweden*
[b] *Dipartimento di Ingegneria Gestionale, Politecnico di Milano, via Lambruschini 4/B, 20156, Milan, Italy*

Abstract

This paper challenges the implicit 'one-size-fits-all' assumption that dominates mainstream program management competence literature. Findings from case studies of 10 programs executed in a large pharmaceutical company suggest that different programs require different competences of program managers. Based on the Pellegrinelli's (1997) program typology we put forward a framework, linking specific management competences to program types. By establishing the link between the program typologies literature and program management competence literature, the paper shows that programs should not be treated as a generic and homogenous category in discussions on program management competences. In addition, the findings highlight program *content* as a significant contingency variable for understanding program management dynamics. The paper suggests a conceptual framework that combines program types with program management competence profiles that could be applied to appointment decisions, staff assessments and organizational development.
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1. Introduction

Having a competent manager is one of the most important factors that influence the success of projects (Turner and Müller, 2005) and programs (Vereecke et al., 2003; Delano, 1998). Thus, a large body of literature addresses the competences of project managers and their linkages to success (Malach-Pines et al., 2009; Müller and Turner, 2010). However, relying on the project management competence literature to construct a theory of program management might be misleading. A number of studies have shown profound differences between programs and projects and revealed the problems of direct transfers of assumptions and results between the two research streams (Artto et al., 2009; Lycett et al., 2004; Pellegrinelli, 1997; Thiry, 2002).

In addition, while a contingency perspective has long dominated the discourse on organization design (Mintzberg, 1979) and has started to be the general norm in project management theory (Engwall, 2003; Sauser et al., 2009; Shenhar and Dvir, 1996), it is still missing in theories on program management (Lycett et al., 2004; Artto et al., 2009). Although it is well established that programs differ (Ferns, 1991; Pellegrinelli, 1997), little attention has been paid to how these differences affect the dynamics of program management and the competence profiles of program managers (Crawford

and Nahmias, 2010; Partington et al., 2005; Pellegrinelli, 2002). With some exceptions (e.g. Pellegrinelli et al., 2007; Shao and Müller, 2011), the program management competence literature pays limited attention to differences between various programs in terms of prerequisites, technology, organizational context, etc. To put it bluntly: we still know little about what constitutes successful program management under various organizational conditions.

This paper addresses this gap between program management competence research and program typology studies. Based on an exploratory case study of the program management of 10 different programs undertaken at one organizational setting, the paper explores how various program management competences are associated with successful program management. The findings suggest that various program settings place distinctively different demands on program managers, thus requiring different competence profiles to cope with them. Building on Pellegrinelli's (1997) typology, the study develops a set of propositions and a conceptual framework that link competences to the program types. Thus, the study complements the emerging discourse on program manager leadership competences in relation to the contingencies of the program context (Shao, 2010; Shao and Müller, 2011). It calls attention to the importance of internal program characteristics, i.e. program content, as a determinant of program management approaches.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of program competence and program typology research, resulting in a theoretical framework for the study. Section 3 discusses the empirical foundation of the study and the methodological approach taken. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the results and proposes future lines of inquiry.

2. Theory

2.1. Competence research in project and program management

The importance of the project manager, and the competences required to successfully perform that role, has been emphasized in project management literature ever since the emergence of the discipline itself (cf. Gaddis, 1959). Today, almost 60 years later, two major research streams revolve around project management competence. The first one is based on quantitative studies, emphasizing the distinctiveness of project management (Turner et al., 2009) and addressing the relationship between certain competence profiles and project management success for specific project types (Malach-Pines et al., 2009; Müller and Turner, 2010). The second stream, building on Sandberg (2000), questions this rationalistic approach to project management competences (Chen and Partington, 2006; Chen et al., 2008). It focuses on the ways project managers conceive and experience their work and suggests competence models using interpretative phenomenographic studies (Sandberg, 2000).

Previous research has shown that findings obtained in the project context are not automatically valid in the program context (Lycett et al., 2004). Specific research on program management competences, however, is still an emerging field. The emphasis of this discourse has been to distinguish between competences for successful project management and competences for successful program management (Ferns, 1991; Pellegrinelli, 2002, 2008). For instance, Partington et al. (2005) identified the importance of wider contextual and strategic awareness for a program manager than for project managers. Furthermore, in comparison to project managers, program managers are supposed to be more capable of embracing uncertainty and ambiguity (Pellegrinelli, 2002) and to act in an ambidextrous mode, i.e. to simultaneously adhere to short-term exploitation of existing knowledge and long-term exploration of innovative solutions (Pellegrinelli et al., 2015; Rijke et al., 2014). Furthermore, program managers should be more able to improvise and adapt to continuously changing conditions, be more skilled in relationship building and stakeholder management, and possess more sophisticated leadership competences than project managers (Pellegrinelli, 2011; Shao and Müller, 2011).

With few exceptions (Shao, 2010; Shao and Müller, 2011), program management competence is discussed in the literature as a generic, universal quality, independent of program type, technical content, or organizational context. The focus is on the distinctive, unique features of program management. By the same token, when distinguishing between the functions and activities of project managers and program managers, scholars tend to regard programs as a homogeneous, generic category (Pellegrinelli, 2002; Partington et al., 2005; Crawford and Nahmias, 2010; Pellegrinelli, 2011).

During the past decade, the issue of contextual conditions and effects on program management is starting to gain momentum in program management research in general (Pellegrinelli et al., 2007; Yu and Kittler, 2012). So far, however, the contextual effects on program management competences have rarely been studied. An exception is Shao and Müller (2011), who found that some program managers varied their leadership styles according to specific situations during program execution (when approaching a deadline, etc.) and hypothesized that context might have a moderating effect on the relationship between program leadership style and program success. This hypothesis was statistically validated by Shao (2010), who identified that flexibility in program governance structures affects the relationship between leadership and program success. Nonetheless, despite the growing body of research on contextual issues in program management, it is not central in the competence stream of the literature.

As a result, we know little about how context-specific factors require particular program management competences. Thus, despite its prominence in organization theory (Mintzberg, 1979), project management research (Engwall, 2003; Sauser et al., 2009; Shenhar and Dvir, 1996) and project management competence research (Malach-Pines et al., 2009; Müller and Turner, 2010), the contingency approach to program management competences has not been developed. In the existing literature, program management is still conceptualized as a homogeneous category.

2.2. Program typologies

Several different studies have shown profound differences between various programs and have suggested a wide range of