The Programme Management Office as Permanent Beta

By Adam Skinner

A Programme Director friend was complaining to me that his Programme Management Office (PMO) seems to be constantly shifting its role and hasn't put forward the same dashboard two months running. I sympathised and made some joke about PMO managers and their obsession with process over practicalities. But, looking back at that conversation, I thought about the PMOs I've built that are very stable, and those that are fluid, and wondered which actually did the job of aiding decision making better.

A constant in the complexity?

Conventional wisdom sees the PMO as the unchanging hub within the chaos of the change programme - calmly turning the information handle, capturing data and packaging it in a consistent fashion. Indeed, most methodologies, even ones that accept the fundamental complexity of the major programme, dictate a central, unchanging PMO. But is this right?

If we assume that the role of the PMO is purely a mechanism to aid lateral and vertical information flow within a classic 'Galbraithian' matrix organisation, then stable consistency is the answer. But two concepts suggest this idea is not only unrealistic - it is unhelpful in a complex programme.

Firstly, a programme is a highly specialised temporary organisation that has a beginning, middle and an end. It has a lifecycle, the different stages of that lifecycle have different focuses and therefore, by definition, the appropriate functions of that organisation will change accordingly. More fundamentally the nature of complexity in major programmes, and their vulnerability to surprise, means the challenge of one month will be subtly different to the challenge of the next – and the efficient organisation must shift function to accommodate that shifting challenge.

A good PMO supports the organisation's function by acting as the organisation's information hub. To add value, the PMO needs to understand this shifting function and adapt how it packages and presents information accordingly. To think of the PMO as the equivalent of the finance division within a permanent organisation – year on year performing the same function, creating the same reports for shareholder and regulatory bodies – is a mistake. The PMO is not part of a permanent organisation but part of a churning, changing, shifting complex programme. To paraphrase Maynard Keynes (badly) 'when the requirement changes, I change my function. What do you do sir?'.

Boring the Board?

There is, to my mind, a more interesting psychological reason why the changing nature of the dashboard might be good for the Programme Director. Professor Paolo Quattrone of Edinburgh Business School writes fascinatingly about the visual tools that support Management & Control Systems such as financial reports and programme dashboards. He develops the idea that the best of these act as a 'rhetorical machine' – literally visual tools that have functions beyond simply passing information – for instance actively creating the environment for decision-making or forcing the viewers to share pertinent information.

In smaller organisations, and before the birth of the modern company, the business owner would 'own' the financial records and actively create the financial reports themselves. Professor Quattrone proposes that the act of creating those reports – engaging with the detailed information and crafting the formal records – provided a richness of information that was a major boon to their decision making. Now, with large organisations, financial reports tend to be created within the financial department by accounting professionals who place the data into a strict, structured format and present it to the Board. Put simply, it is the act of report creation that provides the more intense engagement with the base data, and therefore aids decision making - not the regular review of information packaged in a standard format.

Clearly it's not practical for the Board (whether programme or company) to spend valuable time creating reports. Yet, to a certain extent, the same engaging effect can be generated by the simple act of changing the Programme Dashboard - structure and purpose. This forces the viewers to apply what Daniel Kahneman would refer to as their slow thinking or secondary processes to firstly understand and then interpret the Dashboard, and has the added benefit of preventing complacency seeping in.

A state of Permanent Beta
But without stability of information how can a PMO possibly fulfil its primary function of tracking the programme and attaching probabilities to likely futures? I'd suggest this is not incompatible with the goal of adapting function and reporting style to maintain PMO engagement. From an informational point of view, the PMO collects information, the PMO analyses information and the PMO presents that information. Keeping the data stable means ensuring the data input is consistent and stable, as long as that data is retained the PMO can analyse and present as it sees fit whilst maintaining a constant base set of data.

Software engineers have a phrase which I love – permanent beta. **Permanent (or perpetual) beta** is the keeping of software or a system at the **beta** development stage for an indefinite period of time. Essentially the software is never finished and continues to develop indefinitely – constantly evolving to match the plans and experiments of the developers. For me this is a near perfect analogy for how a truly value-adding PMO should be. Continually changing and developing its functions and outputs to retain engagement and intelligently mirror the needs of the major programme. For the value-adding PMO when it stops changing – it starts shrinking.

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