

WHITE PAPER AMANDA WHITE, CGR BUSINESS PSYCHOLOGISTS LTD

WILL ALL PROGRAMME MANAGERS PLEASE STEP FORWARD?



“Will all Programme Managers please step forward?”

Ask this question in almost any large, multifunctional organisation and – unless you are a Programme Manager yourself – you will be surprised by the number and variety of people who step forward and the various different job titles they hold. Ask the same question of Project Managers and the effect is likely to be even greater – probably including just about anyone charged with planning and organising anything! If you ask the same question of Accountants, Secretaries or Software Developers, you are likely to get much more consistency in the roles and job titles of those who step forward. Why should this be so?

It is not simply the case that “programme” and “project” are terms used sometimes inter-changeably and often inconsistently within and between organisations. It is also a question of definition: few organisations have a clear description of the responsibilities and day-to-day activities that make up and define the professional roles of Programme Managers and Project Managers and what makes them different. With this lack of clarity, it is hardly surprising that organisations have trouble recruiting and developing Programme Managers, as the title means so many things to so many people.

This was the problem facing one of our clients – a global investment bank – who approached CGR to help them implement one element of a programme of initiatives designed to increase Programme Management effectiveness across the business. Aspiring to excellence is a laudable aim but, how can anyone aspire to excellence in their chosen field unless they know what excellence looks like?

Like most global organisations, the bank had many well-established HR tools and processes, including an organisation-wide competency framework that supported the performance appraisal process. Surely, you might think, these competencies must describe excellence, don't they? Well, yes and no.

A well-developed organisation-wide competency framework typically names and describes the basket of personal qualities (such as perseverance), attitudes and values (such as drive for excellence), cognitive skills (such as problem solving) and interpersonal skills (such communication) that underpin and enable high performance right across the organisation's functions, roles and levels of seniority. If one has all these competencies in abundance then, in theory, one has what it takes to achieve excellence in any particular role. These are, in effect, the inputs; the things that any individual needs to have and apply to their particular role. They do define excellence, but in terms of the characteristics of excellent individuals, not excellent performance.

What the bank (and most organisations) was missing was a clear definition of excellent throughputs; the things for which Programme Managers take responsibility and the activities that they undertake from day-to-day, such as responsibility for resources and activities such as defining the programme governance structure.

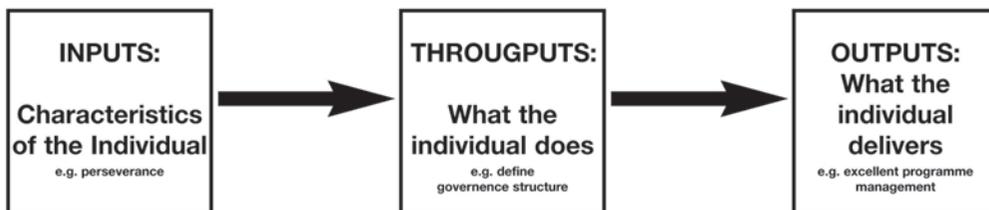
Only with excellent inputs and excellent throughputs can excellent outputs be achieved

Our Solution

The Throughputs

The only place to start was with a blank sheet of paper, a room full of “subject matter experts” – experienced Programme Managers and training providers specialising in Programme management – and the question, “so what do Programme Managers do?” Working in small groups, each participant was asked to jot down on separate post-it notes any and all activities that they could think of that Programme Managers might do during the course of a typical programme, in any order that came to mind.

As each group completed their bundle of activities they pasted them on the wall for all to see. As expected, there were many variations on some common themes and participants were





encouraged to rearrange their and others' post-its into clusters of related or similar activities. This first clustering provided the beginning of the draft of the story of what Programme Managers do, though at this stage the chapters were not in any particular order and the bulk of the narrative was more a collection of headings than prose.

To provide some logical structure, like chapters, we then asked participants to stand back and look at the clusters of activities and to look for clusters that were related or similar and then to rearrange these into larger groups. Four main groups emerged, reflecting the main things that Programme Managers are responsible for managing. These included managing stakeholders and managing resources. To provide a useful narrative, we then asked participants to look at the jotted notes on each post it cluster under each group heading and to describe these activities to us.

Armed now with working titles for the four main areas of responsibility and with near verbatim notes of the activities within these, we were able to produce the first draft of the role profile which, after much consultation and several constructive amendments, was agreed. We had our definition of excellent throughputs.

The Inputs

As described above, the bank had a well-developed organisation-wide competency framework describing the personal qualities, attitudes, value and skills required of all staff. This framework was inevitably couched in generic terms which, while clear, did not necessarily speak in the same language or terms as the Programme Management population. Though we were not at liberty to change the competency labels or to tinker with the existing text of the competency descriptions, we were free to add to the definitions and to provide some examples of what these competencies look like when applied in the Programme Management context.

Again we started with a blank sheet, deliberately not referring to the existing competencies in case these restricted our thinking. Again we went to subject matter experts - experienced job holders and those who have experience of managing Programme Managers - but this time in one-to-one interviews. Our aim was to obtain "from the horse's mouth" descriptions of the way that star performing Programme Managers manifest these competencies. This time we used an interview technique - the "repertory grid" method of contrasting effective and less-effective job holders to tease out the differentiating characteristics - that allowed us to probe our subject matter experts without leading them in any way.

The end product of these interviews was hundreds of individual descriptions of the qualities of star performers but again in no particular order or structure. These therefore needed to be sorted according to the existing competencies to which they related and incorporated into the framework. Not all descriptions made it into the final framework. For example, one description relating to influencing skills was, "Doesn't waste time with people without clout." While quite possibly a true and accurate description, it was a little too "from the horse's mouth" and to the point to be included in an official organisational document! For all those that did make it in, as far as possible we left them in the style and language in which they were given, recognising that this would resonate with the Programme Managers to whom the framework would apply. We now had both our definition of excellent throughputs and of excellent inputs.

The Outputs

Robust, well-crafted role and competency frameworks are all well and good but, in and of themselves, they serve only one purpose: to communicate the organisation's vision of excellence in terms of responsibilities and activities and in terms of individual qualities. It is only when they are applied to management tools and processes that they can deliver the desired outputs; in this case increased Programme Management effectiveness.

Since the successful launch of the role and competency framework, we worked with this client to design a development centre for the Programme Manager population. This centre involves a series of stretching simulations of the responsibilities and activities of the role (the throughputs), allowing trained observers to give constructive feedback to participants about their relative strengths and development needs against the competencies (the inputs). Based on this feedback, participants go on to create personal development plans which, with their commitment and with support from the organisation, will lead to increased personal effectiveness.

In addition to development activities such as a development centre or training courses, role and competency frameworks can be applied to other tools and processes such as:

- * Selection methods - from structured interviews to assessment centres.
- * Performance management processes - from informal feedback to formal appraisals.
- * Succession planning - providing those aspiring to the role with a clear understanding of the qualities they will need to have or acquire and the responsibilities and activities they will need to master.

About the Author

Amanda White is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and director of CGR Business Psychologists Ltd. She and her colleagues design and deliver tailored processes to enable their clients to select, develop, manage and retain talent. Amanda has a particular interest in role and competency profiling and in the design of development centres and her experience extends across industry sectors from Banking to Manufacturing.

Amanda is delivering a workshop on personality and individual differences - "So, are all project managers alike then?" At the BPPM exhibition on 12th October.

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