

All too often projects and programmes are managed at arm's length from the leadership of the organisation or enterprise, and within the internal logic of the project management paradigm. This approach does not work for complex programmes which, typically, are multi-national, multi-agency, multi-million dollar and politically intricate, argues **Sue Pritchard** of Bath Consultancy Group.

COMPLEX PROGRAMMES: A 'WHOLE SYSTEMS' APPROACH

CRITICAL to successful delivery of complex programmes is an organisationally articulate set of approaches capable of speaking to the top teams of the key organisations and their stakeholders, getting alongside them with practical support in their language, to deal with the real business challenges they face.

In a paper presented at the College of Complex Programme Managers (CCPM) Knowledge Sharing Forum in Frankfurt this spring, I focused on how organisations and partnerships can create the conditions for successful complex programme implementation and delivery, through using leading edge approaches from the field of leadership and 'whole systems' development.

The Knowledge Sharing Forum brought together leading thinkers in the world of project management and complexity theory. The 'whole systems' approach can be seen in the figure opposite.

Strategy

Starting at the top of the star, strategy often appears like white smoke from the Vatican chimneys having been lovingly crafted by the top team in private and intense conversations. In contrast, a whole system approach to strategy development engages the enterprise in successful implementation. As George Bernard Shaw said: "It is not enough to know what is good, you must be able to do it" – and knowing

about the doing of it resides throughout the system – most of all in the delivery and enabling functions. In this framework, then, strategy implies:

- A clear statement of intention, purpose and direction capable of being understood throughout the enterprise
- Alignment of the enterprise behind the strategic intent, which requires
- Engaging stakeholders and the workforce to build collective capability for delivery, so that strategy is inextricably linked to the capacity for implementation
- Collecting information for making choices in contested contexts, in a way that involves all stakeholders, including those that are hard to reach
- Maintaining a sense of vision and purpose whilst the system is in motion.

Leadership

Whole systems approaches require adaptive leadership (coined by Heifetz) and collaborative leadership capacity. This differs from conventional leadership that tends towards hierarchy and fragmentation – building in command chains and disaggregating complex systems into silos capable of being managed – where followers look to their leaders for stability and solutions and leaders seek to satisfy this.

For complex programmes, where leaders are themselves breaking new ground and where the

A 'whole systems' approach



STAR QUALITY: The six points of the 'whole systems' approach to complex programmes, as discussed by Sue Pritchard.

deliverables are likely to have no precedent or blue print, an adaptive leadership approach becomes necessary, mobilising the energy and creativity of the whole system. Adaptive leadership:

- Focuses on identifying the next critical challenges and posing key questions to the system
- Resists the pull to create stability and instead holds the organisations' 'feet to the fire' to the extent it can stand
- Mobilises a guiding coalition, distributing leadership throughout the system
- Grows high performing interconnected leadership teams - systems nested in systems
- Sets the example, by 'being the change you want to see in the world'.

Culture

There is a view – popular amongst project managers – which goes: "We don't do culture, a strategy and a plan is everything." But as it says on the boardroom walls of the Ford Motor Company, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'.

For complex programmes, leaders must understand the components of culture and how to work with them. Culture is not just about the presenting behaviours and mindsets of organisations – it also involves a deep appreciation of the emotional ground and the motivational roots of organisational life – that is, the enterprise's histories, the effects of previous events and, indeed, why people join it in the first place.

Working with the culture component of this framework requires:

- Maintaining an appreciative understanding of the multiple component cultures of the partner and stakeholder organisations (we use a simple but highly effective organisational culture appraisal tool, which reveals a great deal about how the organisation sees itself and is seen by others)
- Developing an awareness of how to impact upon and change cultures
- Creating a programme culture where asking difficult and challenging questions is encouraged and appreciated
- Building in requisite system variety for sustainable implementation by valuing difference and diversity – challenging the view that culture is about creating a uniform sense of 'this is how we do things round here'.

Governance

In our work with the partnerships around complex programmes, we notice an interesting phenomenon. Where the partnership is based on good relationships, perhaps tending towards the cosy, governance is light touch, with risk under-managed. Where the relationship is weak, emphasis is on governance



characterised by mistrust, which tends to be tight, detailed and duplicated in each of the partner organisations. Either way, each carries its own dangers. A whole systems approach to governance therefore focuses on:

- Aligning processes across the programme
- Uniting responsibility for governance with an equal ownership of effective implementation
- Negotiating the relationship between effective delegation and appropriate accountability
- Attending to the difference in funding, accountability and governance arrangements, balancing 'can do' risk taking with a stance that protects the public interest and standards of public service
- Ensuring that partnering arrangements do not duplicate existing mechanisms but instead both add specific value and streamline partner procedures

Programme Skills

Traditional project management skills whilst necessary are not sufficient for complex programmes. CCPM is developing its own tool kit for managers of complex programmes, which supports that a different frame is required, where project managers

- Lead programmes as systems
- Balance planning and emergence, and learn to work with ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty
- Establish where certainty exists, and apply traditional project management skills to deliver the known
- Equally establish where certainty does not exist, and negotiate strategies to manage uncertainty
- Cope with changing strategic needs while delivering coherent tactical solutions

Learning

Possibly the most critical point of the star, which ensures that - whatever the difficulty faced or problem encountered - the enterprise has in place architectures to sustain rapid cycles of learning in support of each of the other points

- Ensuring open and rapid feedback loops from the whole system, using 'double loop learning'

(also addressing the underpinning assumptions in the 'plan, do, review' cycle)

- Learning in public – so that intelligence is readily shared across the system and learning from achievement and failures is valued as integral to successful delivery
- Using more effective processes for working and learning in large and small groups – not just more meetings!
- Identifying system patterns (which recur throughout the system) that are helpful or unhelpful - and acting on them
- Rewarding honesty, avoiding the conspiracy of optimism and importantly "speaking truth to power"
- Reinforcing positive change through conscious and planned appreciation.

Whole systems thinking has already had an impact on leading practice in the leadership and organisation fields. Drawing on the research, this approach, which works with the enterprise - through a series of diagnostic and development activities - attends to each of the separate components and, most importantly, the integration and alignment of the separate points to build system-wide capability.

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• The CCPM was incorporated as an independent, not-for-profit body in September 2007. The College works with the international community to fund, facilitate and conduct applied research leading to improvements in complex project management.

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