MANAGING COMPLEX PROJECTS AND PROGRAMS

HOW TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP OF COMPLEX INITIATIVES USING A THIRD-GENERATION APPROACH
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How to Improve Leadership of Complex Initiatives Using a Third-Generation Approach

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WILEY
To family:

To my parents, Dick and Marie Heaslip,
Who taught me to treat life as a program—
Always embracing the richness to be found in its uncertainty and complexity

and

To Julie, Rick, Cody, and Kelley
My life’s incredible program team
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I have learned over the years that exasperation can be a very valuable thing. Not every exasperation, mind you—not the exasperation of discovering that your wallet is at home when you are halfway through a supermarket checkout line—but chronic exasperation, certainly. Chronically exasperating things fester and foment in unusual and sometimes priceless ways. They roil about in the semiconscious and unfettered part of the brain, coalescing into ideas that can burst forth in response to an unexpected trigger. I pay attention to that kind of exasperation because once in a while when it congeals and erupts, it reveals insights that are unexpectedly sensible, enlightening, and clear. Exasperation can beget inspiration, and if we are lucky it can stimulate innovation.

This book, in many ways, is about exasperation. It is about a journey that I started while trying to understand the exasperation experienced by my colleagues and I as we tried to fix a broken pharmaceutical industry. It is about how that journey led to a broader examination of exasperation shared by leaders across many other of today's knowledge-based industries. And it is about how the collective exasperation of many leaders, boiled to its essence, can lead to new and seemingly sensible perspectives about the unique leadership needs of modern knowledge-based industries.

I started my career in a place that was very different from where I am now. I was a biochemical pharmacologist with every intention of spending my life as one. I cherished my profession for the challenges that it presented me—the opportunity to explore a problem through cycles of hypothesis, testing, and fact-finding. It was exasperating at times, but always in a good way. Every failed experiment brought frustrations, but those frustrations were always based on a truth that needed to be uncovered and understood. Examined appropriately, those frustrations often turned into discoveries. They had creative value because they enabled me to see things differently, and they led to some of my favorite “Aha!” moments. I might have enjoyed that role for the entirety of my career.

Over time, however, I came to recognize that being a good scientist was only the first part of a successful scientific career. Big and impactful science was advanced through research programs, and being a good program (or project) leader was equally critical to success. But program
leadership was not something I had been formally schooled in, and the exasperation associated with it was quite different. Big programs were complex—technically, strategically, and operationally. Pursuing them required the support of large organizations, and large organizations had specific expectations as to how complexity should be managed. Those expectations were rarely articulated well. Program leaders in large organizations needed to precisely balance their exercise of individual leadership with the constraints imposed by their organizational hierarchies. It could be a precarious balance that was inconsistently defined and difficult to maintain. Sustaining that balance could be exasperating for a leader.

As my career progressed and I assumed an executive role (as a Vice President of Program, Project and Portfolio Management), I came to be responsible for the actions of many others who led or managed programs and projects. The time I spent developing those leaders (and trying to ensure that they exhibited appropriately balanced leadership) grew—and with it grew my personal exasperation about poorly defined organizational conceptions of leadership. Organizations within my industry lacked a cohesive framework for defining their leadership expectations. Then, in 2006, after I had spent more than twenty years as a program or project leader, I had three experiences that brought my exasperation forever to the surface. Each of them led to a moment of clarity—a specific realization that would trigger my journey seeking to define a better approach to leadership of complex projects and programs—and eventually, to this book.

My first experience occurred while interviewing a candidate who had applied to fill a program leader job within my department. Early in the interview, he asked me to define the specific roles and responsibilities of a program leader within my organization. On that day the question made me uneasy. Program leaders in my department were assigned widely different roles and responsibilities based on their personal skills and capabilities. It was too early in the interview to know what expectations I might set for this candidate.

I began my answer by noting that a single widely accepted “best practice” for leading programs and projects had not been established within the pharmaceutical industry. Because each program was unique, I needed to match candidate skills with program needs as part of building an effective program team. And then I said this: “You will be given responsibilities according to your skills. Your responsibilities as a program leader will be whatever the president of the company agrees them to be.” I quickly praised our president for his empowerment of program leaders and talked about the responsibilities that the candidate might expect to
have. It was an honest answer that I might have given on any other day, and the candidate seemed satisfied by it. But on that day, it did not satisfy me. There was something troubling about it.

Over the previous fifteen or so years, my organization had been led by five different presidents (each, I am sure, with a five-year plan). Each president had a somewhat different approach to his interactions with program and project leadership. Given my answer, how could I be sure that my organization would continue to pursue a clear long-term vision for leadership by my department? How could I promise to a job applicant that I knew what his role would be in the years to come? In the absence of an industry standard, could I feel secure about the vision of program and project leadership that I had been working to build? And why, after decades of pursuing team-based development programs, had my industry not succeeded in defining more generally accepted program and project leadership “best practices”? The questions nagged at me.

In fact, the pharmaceutical industry had struggled mightily in its attempts to develop appropriate models for managing complex research and development programs. In its attempts to strike the right balance between agile autonomous teams and rigorous executive oversight it had flitted between models that alternately emphasized strategically focused versus operationally focused roles for program and project leaders. It seemed that the industry was never comfortable that it had achieved the right balance. And as I thought more about it, I came to an unsettling conclusion:

*My industry’s inability to agree on best practices in the leadership and management of programs (or projects) represented a failure of my profession.*

Complexity of our projects notwithstanding, something was wrong if the most experienced and professional of program and project leaders could not uniformly and unambiguously define their leadership roles within the industry and within their own host organizations. I wondered how common this was in industries other than my own.

The second event occurred just a few weeks later. It began with a phone call from Joel Adler, a faculty member in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania. He wanted to discuss Penn’s master’s degree program in the Organizational Dynamics of Project, Program and Portfolio Management. Joel was interested in establishing a partnership with my organization, and he wondered whether I would find value in sending program and project leaders to an academic program such as Penn’s. I feigned a moment of thought and then quickly said “No” with a simple explanation: My program management staff was
already experienced. A number of them had earned certifications as project or program management professionals. I did not believe that academic studies were the best way to further advance my staff’s capabilities. I explained that program management in complex knowledge-based industries was far different from the process-focused forms of program management that were described in textbooks and training manuals. They were much more pragmatic. “The dynamics of program leadership need to be learned and developed within the context of an organization.”

My response was clear, and at the surface, quite certain. But deep inside, on that day, I found myself almost immediately questioning my own beliefs. Again, I felt troubled.

If leading programs in my organization did not require formal education, then why would program leaders be more qualified than anyone else (for example, my organization’s president) to define their “ideal” roles? Is it just because of their prior experience, or their unique understanding of the program’s needs, or their professional focus? Somehow, those things did not seem like compelling enough differentiators. (Too many of my experienced, knowledgeable, and previously successful program leaders had struggled and failed in their next program leadership assignments.) What makes program leadership a profession, and not just an assignment? And perhaps most importantly, what education would leaders need if we were to design (from scratch if necessary) a better system for leading organizational programs?

The pharmaceutical industry had struggled for years to achieve greater success via its programs and projects—and to a large extent, it had failed. What reason did I have to believe that we had the knowledge necessary to fix our problems? As I asked myself these questions, I came to my second unsettling conclusion:

_We did not understand everything that we needed to know in order to dramatically improve our leadership of programs and projects; something important was missing._

Program leaders should be clearly recognized as having knowledge, capabilities, and skills that are unique and specific to their own professional “science”—the science of managing an organization’s complex and innovative endeavors. I became dissatisfied with my response to Joel because it asserted that the science of managing programs could not be taught. And the admonition of British theorist Stafford Beer began to haunt me:
“Our institutions are failing because they are disobeying laws of effective organization which their administrators do not know about, to which indeed their cultural mind is closed, because they contend that there exists and can exist no science competent to discover those laws.”

Stafford Beer

*(Designing Freedom, 1974)*

Was I contending that a competent “science” of program leadership did not exist? This second observation was as unsettling as the first.

My third experience came shortly thereafter, in the form of a comment from a colleague and friend. It felt like a kick in the groin—my first reaction was surprise, and then there was pain, followed by a lingering discomfort that was very hard to forget. I was in a program team meeting where we were debating the significance of a technical outcome from one of our projects. After voicing my opinion, I was asked half-jokingly to let the others decide, because I was now a program leader and “no longer a scientist.” The suggestion that I was no longer viewed as a scientist was surprising and painful. (Did they forget that my research had resulted in more scientific publications than the rest of the team’s combined?) And then it made me uncomfortable for a very long time—because my friend and colleague, without realizing why, was so very right.

As a scientist, I had been trained to begin every endeavor with an investigation of the current knowledge in the field. I knew that uncovering new knowledge required a thorough understanding of what was already known: what was hypothesized versus proven, what should be accepted and what should be questioned. How could I expect to discover the “missing piece” without a thorough knowledge of all that was already known? I had ceased to be a scientist, but not because my capabilities as a biochemical pharmacologist had diminished. I had ceased to be a scientist because I had failed to approach my program leadership role with the diligence of a scientist. In my professional transition from scientist to leader and then to executive, I had not taken enough time to study the theory, the research, and the knowledge that had preceded me in my new fields. I had allowed myself somehow to accept that the appropriate understanding could be learned on the job. I would never have accepted that premise in my previous role as a biochemical pharmacologist, and now I was all the more embarrassed by my earlier response to Joel.
My exasperation with myself grew, and I reached a third conclusion:

Leader of programs and projects should hold themselves accountable for becoming experts in the “science” of leadership if they are to advance their capabilities and their profession.

I was guilty of the very transgressions that Stafford Beer had attributed to institutional “administrators.” As a consequence of my promotions, I had become one of them.

Together, these three events exposed elements of my profession that were at first troubling, and eventually exasperating. They raised fundamental questions about my profession in program leadership:

Why and when does it become exasperatingly difficult to lead complex programs and projects within an organization?

Why had we, as professional leaders, been unsuccessful in anticipating and addressing that?

What new knowledge or insight would be necessary to correct it?

And was it already available, or could we attain it?

And so I set out on a journey to find answers to my questions.

It started with an investigation of what was known about the “science” of leading programs and projects—published standards that described the principles, practices, and processes considered to best capture cross-industry knowledge of my profession. It progressed to the examination of published research on the leadership attributes critical to a program or project leader’s success. It led to the academic study of theories relevant to the leadership of cross-functional programs and projects in dynamic organizations (for example, systems thinking, and complexity and adaptive leadership theories). And it revealed a rich body of literature that together suggested (at least to me) that improving the leadership of complex programs and projects in knowledge-based organizations of today required a new approach.

It is not my intention to conduct an academic review of all that material here (lest this book begin to read like a thesis). I have chosen instead to pursue a more practice-based narrative in the hope that the book will appeal not only to program and project leaders, but also the executives who control the organizational environments in which program and project leaders work. However, that research led to two important conclusions. The first was that studying the more academic material is a very worthwhile endeavor for anyone who is responsible for (or dependent upon) the effective leadership and management of programs or projects. That conclusion clearly validated my friend Joel.
The second was more surprising, and seemingly much more significant. Examined thoughtfully, the material does seem to provide new and valuable insight about the unique leadership needs of modern organizations. It convinced me that my personal exasperation was an understandable consequence of having applied unsuitable (bureaucratic) thinking to the management of complex modern-day programs. And it seemed to provide at least one of the critical “missing pieces” that my exasperation had left me looking for—a new framework for examining, understanding, and developing program and project management leadership. But one question remained: Was this framework uniquely germane to the needs of my organization or my industry, or did it have much broader applications?

I returned to my discussions with Joel at the University of Pennsylvania, this time to discuss the curriculum being used at Penn for teaching the dynamics of program and project leadership. Our conversation was stimulating. And before it was over (and much to my surprise) I had agreed to join Penn’s faculty, teaching coursework in Program Management Skills and Systems as part of a master’s degree executive education program. I had not accepted this position because I was looking for another job; it was because I was looking for another laboratory.

Teaching at Penn has provided a perfect opportunity to further the journey described in this book. Each semester has presented an opportunity to study the challenges of program leadership with a different group of diverse, intelligent, experienced, and thoughtful professionals who were eager to examine the application of leadership theory and professional standards to his or her own organizational context. My students came from diverse industries—aerospace and defense, healthcare, information technology, telecommunications, consumer products, finance, and energy, to name a few. They had widely different training and experience. They each brought new insights gleaned from their diverse practices. Some were exhilarated by their professional leadership experience; others were exasperated. And together over a seven-year period, we have conducted hundreds of case studies examining the potential re-invention of program leadership principles, and the potential significance of those principles to their own organizations.

The body of work gathered from my colleagues, my students, and the many professional contacts that we have made, reveals surprising consistencies in the issues that are being faced by organizations that otherwise seem to be very, very different. It reveals common threads that tie together the experiences of many program and project leaders.
And it provides a framework by which those threads can be woven into a fabric that is different and better than any we have seen before. The result is a perspective about where program and project leaders (and the organizations that employ them) have been, and a proposal about where we should go if we are to enhance the leadership of complex and innovative endeavors.

I invite you to experience that journey and its interesting conclusions in the chapters that follow.

Richard Heaslip
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Acknowledgments

Readers of Managing Complex Projects and Programs will quickly recognize that it could not have been written without the significant contributions of my colleagues, students, and friends. Part 1 of the book bears witness to the generosity that each of them has shown in sharing their experiences, their knowledge, and their professional and personal insights with me. Part 2 applies their experience, their advice, and their wisdom in the design of new approaches for managing such endeavors. The entire book is a testimony to the contributions that they have made. Unfortunately, I am unable to cite the many contributors to that effort; for the most part, they participated under the promise or presumption of anonymity. But I am humbled and grateful for the enthusiasm each of them showed. So to my colleagues, my students, and my friends who have participated in this journey: Let me say thank you so very much. This book would not exist without you. I only hope that it somehow fulfills the promises that I made to you along the way.

Readers will also note that throughout Managing Complex Projects and Programs, I have made reference to my belief that we need to advance the “science” of managing programs and projects. It is my hope that professionals will continue to explore and develop that concept. It is a subject that I had at first found myself ill-prepared to study; I began this journey accidentally, as a practitioner-turned-student of the profession, not as its academician or philosopher. I have been lucky, however, to have had the opportunity to research the foundations of “programmatic science” while being supported by a particularly well-prepared group of colleagues—the Organizational Dynamics faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. They pointed me in directions that I might not otherwise have discovered. For their encouragement and help, I offer my heartfelt thanks to: Joel Adler PhD, Jean-Marc Choukroun PhD, Richard Bayney PhD, Keith Hornbacher MBA, Larry Starr PhD, John Pourdehnad PhD, Alan Barstow PhD, and Martin F. Stankard PhD.

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to me as I worked to make sense of my research in the field. They challenged me to consider a variety of perspectives, and never failed to remind me that (despite the despair voiced by many individual program and project managers) there were organizations and professionals out there who had already “gotten it right.” Thank you so much: James Carilli PMP PgMP, Michael Collins PMP, Andrea Demaria PMP, Brian Grafsgaard PMP PgMP, Richard Krulis MSE PMP, Penny Pickles MA PMP, Chris Richards PMP, Sandra Smalley ME, Matthew Tomlinson PMP PgMP, Bobbye Underwood PMI-ACP PMP, Kristin Vitello CAPM, and Lynn Wendt PMP PgMP. Most especially from this group, I would like to thank and acknowledge Eric Norman PMP PgMP, for the many hours we spent immersed in thoughtful discussion and debate about our visions of Program and Project Management.

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To my wife Julie, and my children Rick, Cody, and Kelley—thank you for being there to support me in this and every journey, and at the same time for holding the rest of the world at bay. Your love, your understanding, and your support energize and expand my life.

And to Mom and Dad—yes, it is done; you can stop asking. Thank you for worrying that I’ve been working too hard; the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. I love you.
PART 1

Professional Project and Program Management—Yesterday and Today
I recall to this day the first time I acted as a project leader. It happened quite by accident. I was a fifteen-year-old volunteer who, for reasons I didn’t understand, had just been asked to co-manage the opening of a coffee house for teens in the basement of a local church. It was an unlikely request; I was a very quiet kid who didn’t really like coffee, and it wasn’t my church. But Martin, the adult in charge of the project, had for some reason picked me from among a group of interested friends to fill the role “for a while.” (I learned later that such deception is common in the recruitment of first-time project leaders!) I hesitantly agreed after recognizing that it would enable me to assign my closest friends to the choice roles. (I thought that was a good thing.) The goal, I believed, was simple: To organize coffee house events that gave teens someplace fun to go on cold Saturday nights. For Martin, though, it was something different. The project was part of a bigger program intended to teach teens about accepting responsibility, working in teams, and developing leadership skills—perhaps as a diversion from the riskier distractions of the early 1970s.

The coffee house openings became popular events in our town, but preparing for them was a lot more work than I had anticipated. I wasn’t really sure of what was expected of me in my “leader” role. I filled the role as best I could, mostly by cataloging the work activities that we needed to complete and soliciting volunteers from our team to help in getting them done. At first it was a reasonably easy task. Over time, however, our committees grew weary and I found that I needed to pressure team members into fulfilling their commitments. In one of our meetings, an argument broke out. Steve (a close friend of mine) was accused of not doing his share of the work. He didn’t understand that his commitment was necessary, and other team members resented him for not doing his part. As the argument got uglier, I shrank into my chair and made a silent
vow to stay out of it. And then Martin called for a timeout and asked for my opinion. I was cornered.

After a silence filled with inner conflict and panic, I said to my friend, “The coffee house is like a galley ship where we all have to row. If someone stops rowing on his side, we will go in a circle. People are upset because last week you stopped rowing . . . and this week it sounds like you want to water-ski. Your friends are saying, ‘You can’t.’”

It was a silly metaphor. (Let me apologize at the outset. I may use too many of those.) But it broke the tension. The people at the meeting burst out laughing. Some applauded, and others who I hardly knew got out of their chairs to give me a high five. Steve gave me a thumbs up to indicate he understood, and we were back on track. Martin smiled and nodded at me. He asked me to run the rest of the meeting and then he left.

It seemed like forever before my heart stopped racing. It might have been out of fear that I could have lost a good friend. Maybe it was fright about running the rest of the meeting, or alarm about what other surprises were up Martin’s sleeves. But I now suspect that in some unexpected way, that moment changed my life. I realized later that I was able (in a manner befitting my then-quiet personality) to help a group of friends re-align in their commitment to each other and to their shared goals.

My friends thanked me afterwards for exerting influence that I didn’t know I had, and the coffee houses that followed went smoothly and successfully. I had achieved my goal, and (though I didn’t realize it at the time) so had Martin. I had experienced for the first time what it was like to be a project leader. I was quietly exhilarated, and I suspect Martin was too.

I have since come to believe that the best reason to become a project or program leader is to personally experience that exhilaration.

**Leading Projects and Programs**

It should be easy to understand why those who are responsible for leading or managing projects or programs would find the role to be exhilarating. To be associated with projects or programs is to be “where the action is.” Projects and programs provide the means for pursuing new and important things. To be asked to lead or manage one is to be entrusted with delivering a promise for the future, and being successful in that should certainly be exciting. Whether the intent is to open a coffee house or to pursue much more important project or program goals—the personal exhilaration that comes with success is always gratifying.
Project or program leadership can also be challenging and scary, however. It is common that success does not come easily. Leaders can expect to be held personally accountable for ensuring that they pursue success in the best possible way. They must ensure that their goals are clearly defined and communicated, and that they are accepted by stakeholders who may have quite different perspectives, desires, and motivations. Project or program leaders are responsible for designing effective and supportable plans and for managing the long periods of the often intense and difficult work required to complete them. Within an organizational environment, each of these tasks can be daunting. And yet, for some—for uniquely skilled and passionate leaders who are good at overcoming challenges to achieve important goals—it seems only to increase the exhilaration that they experience.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of working with some extremely talented project and program leaders. The best of them possess a unique blend of leadership competencies that they skillfully call upon in just the right moments. They exude passion and dedication for the goals they are pursuing and for the teams with whom they work. And each of them is invigorated by the success that their teams achieve. They are, in my view, organizational athletes. As they lead, they are exhilarated by the thrill of moving their teams forward with deftly executed plays, managing the clock, analyzing their options, and defining and re-defining strategy in the moment. They find that working on their program and project teams is exciting in the same ways that competing on the athletic field might be. They understand that they won’t always win. In fact, some of them work in environments where their goals can rarely be achieved—where factors that cannot be anticipated or controlled will stymie even the best of their endeavors. Still, they love what they do. They take pride in their work as they pursue elusive goals, and they are enlivened by the prospect of making a real difference.

To work with such people can be inspiring; I would wish it on anyone. For those who have (or could develop) the appropriate personal and technical skills, I would advise that being a leader of a project or program team is a wonderful, even ideal profession. And I believe it bears repeating—the best reason to become a project or program leader is to personally experience that exhilaration.

My enthusiasm for the profession of project and program management has served me well in my professional life. It has carried me forward. However, over time I have found that my perspective does not resonate as well with some of my peers. Increasingly often, when I discuss this “ideal” career, I have found that successful members of my profession question
whether my views are, well, too “idyllic.” They agree that their careers have been exhilarating, but many of them lament that there is something about their careers that has been changing over time. They confide that they are tiring, and with increasing frequency, they admit to periods where they are more exasperated than exhilarated. And they suggest that it is somehow related to changes in their organizations’ expectations, or in their organizations’ cultures.

It would be easy to dismiss such perspectives as isolated events were they to be made infrequently, or by those who are seemingly less successful in or knowledgeable about their leadership roles, or if (deep down) I didn’t recognize some of those same feelings within myself. But after two decades in a variety of organizational roles, I cannot help but observe that these views have been expressed with increasing frequency by many of my most successful colleagues—those whom I would consider to be any organization’s “franchise” athletes. And as I have listened to them, and examined my own feelings more deeply, I cannot help but conclude that there is a growing, even urgent, need to understand why.

This book is about the journey I have taken to answer that question, and to explore changes that would enable these athletes and the organizations in which they work to more successfully deliver the exhilarating outcomes that they both desire. It is based on observations made by some of the best leaders and managers whom I have come to know through my professional lives—as a project and then program leader, as an executive responsible for developing such leaders, as an academic who studies the “science” of program leadership, and an advisor to organizations striving to improve their leadership capabilities. It seeks to take the perspectives of these very smart and successful people and, after combining them with insights from a rich literature on leadership, to propose a new framework for managing complex projects and programs being pursued by modern organizations.

My journey began with a search for the answer to a seemingly simple question: What circumstances have led experienced, successful project and program leaders to become exasperated with their professions?

As might be expected, individual professionals gave different answers to that question. To my surprise, however, I found that when answering the question, experienced project and program leaders did not usually point to professional challenges commonly discussed in so many other good books. They did not cite difficulties of learning the “body of knowledge” of a project manager, or of building a winning team, or of leading without authority, or of listening and communicating effectively. In fact,