

Are Program Managers on the Career Path to the C-Level?

By

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The debate on whether Program Managers would make effective senior executives is one that has gained attention in recent years. However, for this article we thought we would pose this question and contrast it with the muses of a well respected Management Guru, Peter Drucker. Drucker, who is often referred to as the “father of modern management”, signaled out eight characteristics of effective executives¹:

1. They ask, “What needs to be done?”
2. They ask, “What is right for the enterprise?”
3. They develop action plans.
4. They take responsibility for decisions.
5. They take responsibility for communicating.
6. They are focused on opportunities rather than problems.
7. They run productive meetings.
8. They think and say “we”, rather than “I”.

How different are these eight characteristics from the day to day responsibilities and behaviors of an effective program manager?

One of the first responsibilities of a program manager is to shape their program. This involves working with the program sponsors to map out the core reasons for the program, management expectations and the overall program scope, timeline, plus the implementation and communication plans. Once the “base details” of the program are established, the program manager is accountable for ensuring the structure of the program is set up to be effective and that it will meet the key program goals. During the course of a program, the program manager will spend a significant portion of his or her time on communication – both the formal program communication to stakeholders (often “reporting up the line”), the informal communication to project managers, and “reporting down the line” for the constituent program and project-level resources. When we compare these program activities and behaviors to those singled out by Drucker for effective executives, three are already evidenced in the core competencies of program managers; (1) asking “*What needs to be done*”, (2) *Development of Action plans*, and (3) *Responsibility for communicating*.

To be an effective program manager (or indeed an effective project manager) you need to be skilled at team motivation. Central to team motivation is the ability to instill a sense of “team over self”. This entails various actions, including referring to “we” rather than “I” at all times, and fostering team cohesion continuously. The most effective program managers understand the risks to being individualistic, and will most certainly refer to the greater good of “we” as the team instead of “I” on all occasions, and give credit where credit is due. This aligns with Drucker’s eighth point of *think and say “we”, rather than “I”*.

It is likely (perhaps probable) that during the course of program execution, two things will occur. Problems and challenges will arise, and a program manager will have to make many pro-active decisions to respond to them. These decisions range from day to day program decisions to major decisions concerning issues that have been escalated up to the program level by project managers of projects under the program. An effective program manager will resolve problems using the best interest of the enterprise at all times. Programs should of course always be aligned to enterprise strategic goals and therefore the best interest of the program is also the best

¹ “What Makes an Effective Executive?”, Peter F Drucker, Harvard Business Review, June 2004.

interest of the enterprise. An effective program manager will also look for the “positives” in any situation; even when problems arise. This is also important for team morale. This aligns with Drucker’s second and third points of *taking responsibility for decisions*, asking “*What is right for the enterprise?*”, and his sixth point of *focusing on opportunities rather than problems*.

Program managers are most likely (though this is not always the case) to have spent several years of their careers as project managers in their respective industry. This does not mean that good project management should be considered a prerequisite for program management. The two disciplines, while inter-related, require different competencies. However, effective program managers will ensure resources are balanced, and will work closely with project managers at all times. Ensuring they are on the same “wavelength” as their project managers is key. Similar to the seventh trait noted by Drucker, part of this is to *run productive meetings*, thus ensuring that meeting time is utilized in the most effective manner.

In conclusion, according to the eight characteristics suggested by Drucker, a truly effective program manager may have good foundations to make an effective executive. That said, the responsibilities of executive management demand skills that all people who graduate to it need to learn and apply in order to be effective.

Bios:

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