

A Framework for Improving Federal Program Management

By Dr. Janet A. Weiss

The public, Congress, and the executive branch have a crucial stake in the performance and management of U.S. federal programs. Yet, over time, it has proved difficult for policymakers to strengthen program management across the federal government. The Program Management Improvement Accountability Act (PMIAA) is the most recent example from decades of efforts to improve government management with the goal of better outcomes for the American people. This 2016 law requires, among other provisions, “governmentwide standards, policies, and guidelines for program and project management for executive agencies.”

This report examines the experiences of a wide range of federal program managers in implementing large-scale programs. It assesses whether requirements like those stipulated in PMIAA are likely to improve program management and how best to raise the performance of program managers.

It also examines why efforts to improve program management cannot succeed without taking into account the diversity of federal programs. To avoid imposing overly simple solutions on heterogeneous phenomena, federal policies to improve operations should be based on a realistic picture of program management.

This report begins by discussing the different types of federal programs and how they differ from each other in ways that have consequences for how they should be managed. To analyze these differences, this report uses a conceptual framework that shows the relationship between program characteristics and the strategies that managers use. The framework reveals why techniques for good management need to be adapted to the type of program being managed, and why good managers use multiple strategies to achieve good results.

Framework of Organizational Effectiveness for Different Types of Programs

What are the management challenges that arise across different kinds of programs? This report offers a way to distinguish the management styles indicated for different types of programs.

A powerful diagnostic tool, the “Competing Values Framework,” has been developed by Kim Cameron, Robert Quinn, and colleagues to help leaders and managers understand what makes their organizations effective. It has been tested empirically with thousands of organizations and over 100,000 managers from private, nonprofit, and public sectors. This section explains the framework, and then applies the framework to different kinds of federal programs. The framework reveals the basic managerial challenges that arise in different kinds of federal programs. Because the challenges vary, the framework also highlights differences in the skills and strategies that make managers effective in the context of different kinds of programs.

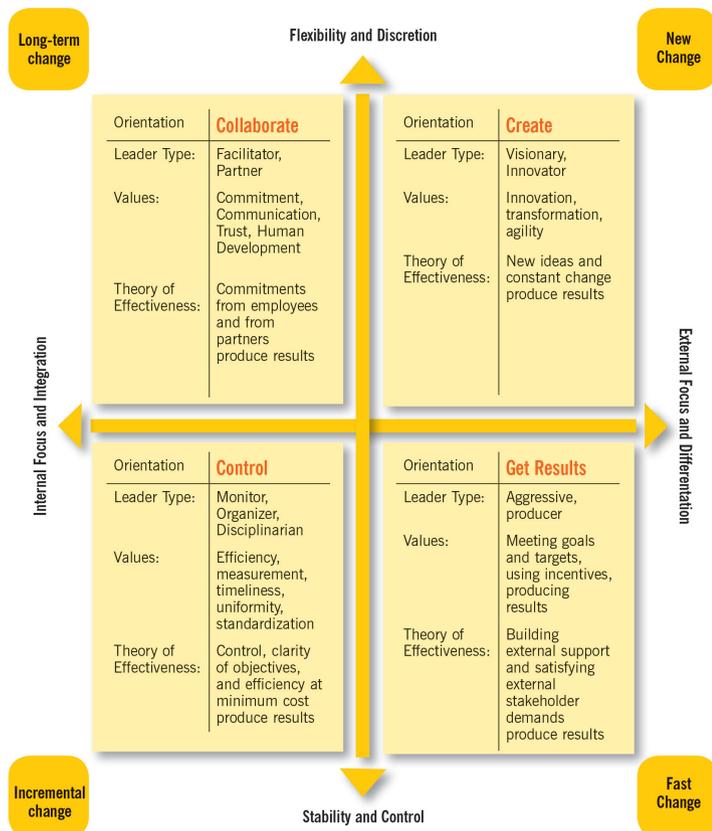
The framework shows how the management styles in the different quadrants—the leader types, their values, and theories of effectiveness—produce different kinds of change.

- **The Collaborate Quadrant:** Change can be institutionalized over the long term, as those working on the change take ownership of implementation and develop the necessary expertise to carry it out.
- **The Create Quadrant:** Change can be novel and innovative, as creative program ideas can be nurtured and launched.
- **The Get Results Quadrant:** Change can be accomplished quickly, with an aggressive and hard-driving approach to meeting targets and satisfying external demands.

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- **The Control Quadrant:** Change can be accomplished incrementally, and the incremental changes can be locked into the organizations’ procedures and practices.

Figure 1: The Competing Values Framework for Organizational Effectiveness



Source: Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture, 3rd ed., adapted by the author

These four kinds of change are represented in the four corners of Figure 1.

Different Types of Programs Make Differing Demands on Program Managers

As discussed in the previous sections, one single style of management and one common definition of program

management cannot capture the range of skills and strategies needed by managers leading different types of federal programs. PMIAA calls for a single standard to be applied across all government programs, a standard that is most appropriate for federal programs that look like those described in the Control quadrant of the Competing Values Framework.

The theory of change for PMIAA suggests that there is “one right way” to carry out program management, and that the law will spread the one right way to more managers and more programs. This theory is not consistent with the finding that programs differ substantially in the demands they place on program managers.

Research Insight: One set of standards will not apply equally to all federal programs. As the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) proceed with the implementation of PMIAA, they will find the law best fits programs that are squarely in the Control quadrant. To make the provisions of the law useful to program managers who work in other quadrants, OMB, OPM, and the agencies need a range of standards that reflect differing program needs.

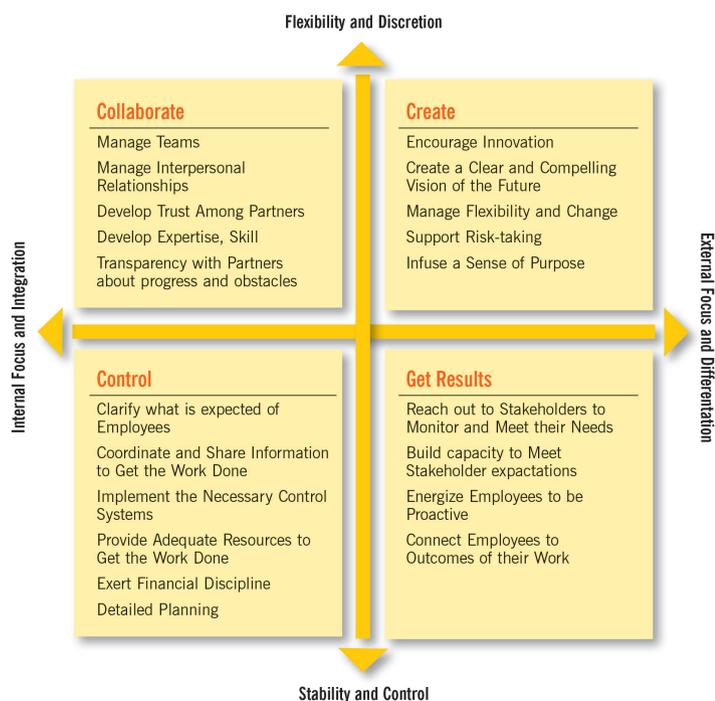
Which Program Management Strategies Are Most Effective in Different Quadrants?

Just as it is important to appreciate how and why programs differ in the management challenges they present, managers need to know which skills and strategies are needed to meet those challenges. The framework shows how differences among programs lead managers to use strategies that are adapted to the challenges of their programs. As Figure 2 shows, different programs call for different strategies or skills.

When a program is centered in one of the quadrants, the most successful managers in that program develop a matching style, relying heavily on the strategies most important in that quadrant. Thus, for programs centered in the Control quadrant, managers focus on organizing, measuring, increasing efficiency, standardizing, and eliminating errors. That kind of leadership is the right match for those programs. If managers are responsible for programs that are centered in the Create quadrant, they are not likely

to succeed if they rely heavily on control-oriented skills that worked so well in a different program. Instead, they need to develop management skills and embrace strategies that are entrepreneurial, innovative, risk-taking, and flexible. The framework suggests which skills will be most important to success with a given program.

Figure 2: Different Program Management Strategies Are Used in the Competing Values Framework



Source: Cameron and Quinn, Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture, 3rd ed., adapted by the author

Managers Need a Portfolio of Skills and Capacity to Match Their Programs

Building the skills of program managers can be very helpful for improvement, so long as the available training and support matches the skills and expertise needed in differing programs. Of course, the federal government already invests considerable resources in training and support for senior managers within agencies and through OPM, the Senior Executive Service, and interagency programs. The question is how to add to the current commitment to training in ways that will strengthen the capacity of program managers to be effective.

Research Insight: Establishing a separate job series and career path for program and project managers may not accomplish its intended purpose. PMIAA provides for OPM to establish a new job series and define a career path for program and project managers; this assumes that program managers are fundamentally alike across a range of different program types. With a variety of skills needed for program management, it is not clear that a unified job career will make it easier to recruit, train, or retain excellent program managers.

Research Insight: The skills and competencies to be a successful program manager will vary, depending on the type of program to be managed. PMIAA requires that OPM identify skills and competencies needed for federal program and project managers. While various groups have developed lists of competencies, some of these make the assumption that there is only one kind of program, and that this program demands a set of Control quadrant skills. Successful leaders require discrete skills, and the capacity to deploy those skills skillfully and strategically, to meet changing circumstances.

Research Insight: Communities of practice can be an important mechanism to share expertise among program managers across agencies and different program types. Bringing together program managers across the federal government to learn from one another is a useful way to inspire creative thinking, share expertise, and introduce new program managers to resources and support that can help them succeed.

As the implementation of PMIAA moves ahead, policymakers need to appreciate the full range of skills and experiences needed to manage programs of different types. Policymakers should ensure sufficient flexibility and variation when issuing guidance, to reflect the diversity that program managers experience. The resulting guidance should also address systemic constraints that inhibit managers from being effective in meeting mission demands. Following are seven recommendations to the central agencies responsible for overseeing governmentwide implementation of PMIAA, and four recommendations to each of the federal agencies covered by the Act.

Recommendations for Government-wide Implementation of PMIAA

- The OMB and the OPM should develop multiple standards and guidelines, to reflect the different management skills and experiences needed to manage different types of programs.
- OMB and OPM should create opportunities for high-performing program managers to learn skills from one another.
- OMB should use the annual portfolio reviews and five-year strategic plan that are required by PMIAA to identify and propose simplifications for federal workforce planning and ease the burden on program managers.
- OMB and the Program Management Policy Council should support the creation of communities of practice where program managers from multiple agencies who work on similar issues can learn from one another.
- OPM should develop multiple strands of program management training, tailored for managers of different types of programs.
- OPM should develop an inclusive list of competencies for program management, using the Executive Core Qualifications for the Senior Executive Service as a possible starting point.
- OPM should plan for a new or improved job series after recognizing that only some program managers will benefit from a single career path, and many will benefit from a variety of career trajectories.

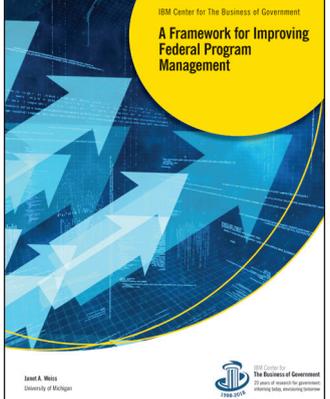
Recommendations for Agency-level Implementation of PMIAA

- Agency Program Management Improvement Officers (PMIOs) should recognize the different kinds of programs in their agencies, and tailor a program manager training plan aligned to each kind of program.
- Agency PMIOs should help to create multiple communities of practice for program managers in each agency as they develop required agency implementation plans. To improve mentoring and retention of program managers, these communities should be organized around shared challenges.

- Agency PMIOs should develop plans to recognize excellence in program management, give high-performing program managers developmental assignments, and expand opportunities for training at multiple career stages.
- Agency leaders should provide public celebration and recognition of program managers who achieve measurable progress toward agency goals.

TO LEARN MORE

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The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342