

The Gold Standard in Program Management: Part 2

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Across the nation, school districts from big cities to outer suburbs face massive and growing needs for capital investment in their facilities. To varying degrees, they are recognizing and responding to these concerns by planning for bond issues, applying for state funding and developing facility master plans. Most districts are only partly aware, however, of the scale and complexity of the challenges they face in implementing these programs successfully.

PART II

Program Management

The **first part** ^[1] of this article outlined program management challenges many school districts face as well as enemies of success. Here, we will discuss how to address and navigate those challenges.

The Solution

How, in the face of the chaos that may be introduced by dynamic factors to a program already in progress, can a program manager ensure successful results? The answer lies not in the process but in the personal characteristics of a new breed of program manager — exemplars of a new “Gold Standard” of program management that will be necessary to navigate the demands of the school modernization programs of the future.

Regardless of the clarity and soundness of the procedures and processes that may be delineated by professional standards such as those of the Project Management Institute (PMI), it is the people who make the real difference in a program’s success or failure. Like a battlefield general, successful school modernization program managers today will have the personal characteristics necessary to adapt their tactics to continue the relentless pursuit of overarching strategy, even as battlefield conditions rapidly shift and the many enemies of program outcomes maneuver and counter-attack. Professionals adhering to the Gold Standard of program management must be trusted advisors, innovators and, ultimately, leaders to achieve successful program outcomes.

Trusted Advisor

A program manager’s role is never to supplant the vision-setting and decision-making authority of the owner who may be — in the case of a school district — a superintendent, chief administrative officer or facilities director. Rather, a Gold Standard program manager must facilitate a process by

which the owner establishes a clear but informed vision and makes decisions with confidence throughout the program life cycle.

A Gold Standard program manager will therefore strive, during the program-planning phase, to equip the owner with a thorough understanding of the universe of possible program outcomes and distill the owner's strategic program goals into a written vision. Once that vision is established, the Gold Standard program manager will internalize and embrace it. Taking personal responsibility for the relentless execution of the owner's vision is what empowers a program manager to make judgments and adapt tactics to the changing political, demographic and programmatic factors that will be sure to buffet the program.

Throughout the life of a program, the Gold Standard program manager will return consistently to this same cycle as major decisions are required: Define, for the owner, the universe of possible options; support with all relevant information and analysis of the feasibility the pros and cons of each option; and facilitate the owner's decision, which the program manager can then implement. Clearly, this requires the program manager to rely not only on process, but also on a deep understanding of the school district's political environment, its construction market and evolving trends in facility planning concepts.

Innovator

Armed with this solid foundation of industry knowledge and embracing the specific vision of the owner, the Gold Standard program manager must be emboldened to innovate. Is a unique new set of architectural program elements required to satisfy diverse stakeholders whose approval is critical to program success? Is a modification or combination of traditional project delivery methods necessary to respond to unique combinations of schedule, scope and budget drivers? Can budgets be optimized by addressing some modernization needs on a more economic, program-wide basis rather than project-by-project? While such alternatives must always be presented to and approved by the owner, the Gold Standard program manager will always proactively explore opportunities to overcome obstacles.

Leader

The focus of existing program management standards on process has resulted in a preponderance of professionals in the industry focused on paper-pushing, passive observation and reporting rather than on keying their own actions and motivating those of others to achieve strategic program goals. By contrast, Gold Standard program managers act as an extension of the owner and embrace the owner's desired outcomes as their own. Such program managers view themselves as the driving force to ensure that the "train keeps running" and stays on track. Without a focused and committed hand, any program can and will be derailed by dynamic influences.

Conclusion

The reader might readily observe that Gold Standard program management, as described herein, calls for the demonstration of a particular set of personal characteristics and behaviors for which there are no professional standards or licenses. No form of certification implies that a program manager will be a trusted advisor, an innovator and a leader. These characteristics will, however, be the marks of the managers who deliver success in the increasingly dynamic environment of the future. Whether hired in-house by school districts or engaged on an outsourced basis, Gold Standard program managers may appear more expensive than their paper-pushing peers. But, at a few percentage points of the total cost of a program over which they can affect value at many multiples of their cost, a Gold Standard program manager may well be the best bargain in the business of education.

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staff housing.

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