

How to Turn Organizational Silos into Results ¹

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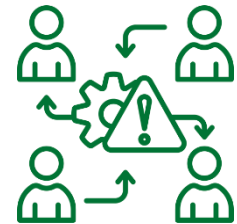
Some work is simply too big for a project. Success depends on multiple teams, decisions, and timelines fitting together. Even if each part is a standalone success, the overall result may still fail; the product can't be used, the service doesn't meet the client's needs, or the intended benefits never materialize.

The problem isn't primarily execution. It's how to integrate across silos.

A common misdiagnosis

I've seen leaders try to manage the complexity by using a single, very large project. That rarely helps. Scope becomes unwieldy, dependencies multiply, and competing priorities overwhelm the project structure.

Alternatively, I've seen other leaders divide the work into smaller projects and ask teams to coordinate with each other ad-hoc. That usually breaks too—the coordination is informal, dependent on personal relationships, and fragile under pressure.



The real challenge is a lack of integration, and it shows up most clearly in the seams between projects.

- Unmet dependencies cut across teams and schedules.
- Decisions optimize one effort while damaging another.
- Risks aren't managed because no single project owns them.

Those aren't problems that better project management alone will solve.

Why projects struggle

In practice, no single project is accountable for the problems that show up in those seams. Project managers, appropriately focused on delivering their own scope, struggle to

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consistently identify and resolve issues that sit between projects. Leaders see last-minute escalations and expensive surprises because integration has become everyone's concern but no one's responsibility.

What changes when the work is treated as a program

This is where treating the work as a program changes the outcome.

A program is not a project on steroids. It is a different way of organizing accountability. Each project is accountable for delivering its own segment of the work. The program is accountable for making those segments work together to produce an integrated outcome and real benefits.

Think of it like an orchestra. Each musician can play their part flawlessly, but the music fails without a conductor who is responsible for timing, balance, and coherence across the whole.

Program management is like the conductor. It focuses on the work that no single project owns: managing dependencies across projects, making tradeoffs that favor the whole over individual projects, and addressing risks that touch multiple projects.



A program does not make the work easier—but it does make it coherent and more efficient, reducing costly rework by forcing the hardest integration decisions early.

When program management isn't the right tool

Program management isn't always necessary. It adds value when multiple streams of work must succeed together to produce a usable result. It is usually unnecessary when work can stand alone or when streams of work are largely independent. In those cases, adding a program structure introduces overhead without improving results.

A simple two-part test is often enough. First, would poor interactions between projects create serious problems? If so, who is clearly accountable for making them work together? If you can't answer that, the organization is relying on goodwill and ad-hoc coordination rather than deliberate design.

A short checklist for leaders

Misalignment becomes visible when leaders ask a few basic questions:

- Who is accountable for the integrated outcome?
- Where are cross-project tradeoffs actually decided?
- Which risks exist because efforts interact?
- How will we know the combined result is usable, not just complete?



If these questions are difficult to answer, the work is likely structured incorrectly.

Execute together

Good project management helps organizations execute well. Program management helps them execute together.

When the work is complex and interdependent, programs help you turn effort into coordinated results.

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About the Author



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Jeff Oltmann helps organizations accelerate results through strategy deployment and project portfolio management. He consults, teaches, and leads forums for senior PMO leaders. He is principal at Synergy Professional Services (spspro.com) in Portland, Oregon and is on the faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University. He was previously on executive staff at IBM and is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum, a gathering of senior managers who lead project-based organizations (pplforum.org).

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