



**EXPERTS TALK**

# Demystifying Program Management for Owners with **Erin Slayton**



## **Delivering Big Picture Benefits for Owners and Communities**

Program management is not a new concept in our industry but its usefulness in today's world of aging infrastructure, funding constraints and ever-increasing stakeholder expectations is greater than ever. Asset-intensive infrastructure capital programs come in all shapes and sizes and need a range of services that are flexible and adapted to the unique needs of each owner and program.

In this interview, Erin Slayton P.E., our transportation program management services director, explores key points that are vital to successful program management. She shares wisdom on tailoring resources suited to each owner's situation. Drawing on her deep background on complex, multi-billion-dollar programs, she sheds light on how to approach program management to achieve its potential.

With nearly 20 years of experience in the planning, design and delivery of major transportation infrastructure programs, **Erin Slayton** leads delivery of program management services for HDR's clients in all transportation markets with a focus on the continued enhancement of our systems and tools and diversification of our project life cycle service capabilities. Whether serving as an advisor to our clients or mentoring new program management professionals, she is a trusted collaborator who uncovers solutions to help achieve both program and professional success.

### **Q. What are some of the misperceptions or myths about program management that owners have asked you about?**

A. The most common misperception is that it's typical "project" management, just on a larger scale. On the contrary, the risks are different, the considerations are different. A \$1 billion program isn't just a bigger \$100 million project. You don't just scale up your delivery approach, you think it through differently.

We define program management as planning and delivering interrelated projects and/or services, managed by an integrated multi-disciplinary team in a coordinated way, to achieve an overarching outcome and obtain benefits and control that could not be obtained by managing them individually.

When you are delivering a program of projects, the overarching goal you are looking to achieve is more than the sum of its parts, so you have to look at the big picture of how each of the individual projects impacts the goals of the overall program. What might be good for one project might create a challenge for another but, taken as a whole, we can find the right balance to deliver on the program's overall

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goals and not just the individual project goals. Using a programmatic approach helps us manage the risks by looking at all of the individual project risks together in the overall program to find the “right” and most efficient and effective risk profile for the program.

**Q. It sounds expensive. Exactly how does program management add value?**

A. A program management approach is scalable to the needs of the program, and frequently hinges on upfront attention to identifying risks, using project controls tools, and maximizing staff efficiency. The goal is to invest time early to develop an efficient team structure and to manage risks that may get missed without a programmatic approach. That upfront effort pays off over the life of the program in efficiencies and effectiveness. It helps the project team see challenges before they happen.

South Mountain Freeway in Phoenix is a great example where HDR’s program management team collaborated with the owner on an approach that allowed the freeway to open three years earlier than if it had been built using a traditional approach, with a cost savings of more than \$100 million. Our team co-located with a core group of Arizona DOT staff, working as a seamless extension of their staff through all phases of the program. We

fostered an environment where, at each critical junction of the project, we had the right people making the right decisions at the right time. The team had a robust project controls system, communicated through dashboards, and the owner embraced the information, using it as the basis for weekly team meetings. We could see the challenges before they became full-blown problems so we could mitigate most issues before they resulted in a claim. We had information easily presentable to executive leadership and to FHWA. It was a clean way of managing the inevitable challenges.

**Q. When is the right time and what are the first steps an owner should take to initiate program management?**

A. The best benefits are gained by bringing in a small advisory team as early as possible to help determine the components and structure of the program as well as delivery methods. At the beginning you need a few people who are very strategic — who have the lived experience of delivering large or complex programs — to help you develop the plan and approach. As you develop the plan you can selectively add people who bring value on key elements to help you deliver.

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A great example is HDR's work as technical advisor for the CA\$10.9 billion Ontario Line Subway in Toronto — a 16-kilometer line involving three P3 contractor teams. We're setting up and managing an integrated program management approach in collaboration with the owner, providing information/data to support key decisions, streamlining efficiencies and communications, and developing a risk management process that continues to evolve and develop as new phases begin. We started with a select, small team and are adding carefully chosen expertise as the project progresses. We will continue to adjust as needed over the life of this program, which is expected to last at least 10 years.

**Q. What's important to think about as you finish up and close out a program management assignment?**

A. Our approach to program management is not transactional — it's relational. What I mean by that is often we are embedded with the client in delivering the program and we live it every day. Of course, there is knowledge transfer throughout the program, and handoff as the program winds down. What we find is that our clients want a trusted partner throughout the entire process so at the end we make sure they have whatever they need to operate the system or program and stand ready to transition to the next program if needed.

**Q. There are past industry examples where a program management approach did not return the expected value or results. What makes HDR's approach successful?**

A. Owners have questioned what program management means and how to get value from it.

HDR excels even when initial plans evolve due to changes caused by new funding approaches, lack of interest in a design-build procurement, or reorganization within a client's leadership team. We stand by our client's side, find the solutions together, and deliver the program so our clients fulfill their commitments to their constituents, even when things don't go according to the initial plan.

HDR's "Listen First" values are critical. It makes a big difference in how the team interacts because we start from an assumption of trust and partnership and listening, focused on solving problems together.

I always say, "Leave your logo at the door." Especially for large integrated teams, co-located with an owner, we're all working for the good of the team and the program and the community. A very strong element of our approach is this attitude that we're going to be there with you, finding the right solutions to keep your program moving forward while managing the risks at every step of the way. We've proven many times that together, we make great things possible.



**Q. How did you get started in program management?**

**A.** I've always been fascinated by bridge engineering, especially growing up near the infamous Tacoma Narrows Bridge, and I remember riding across the replacement structure as a kid. I studied structures in college, interned on the Tacoma Narrows Bridge when they added the second span, and was on a career path to be a bridge engineer. I got the opportunity to work for the Seattle Popular Monorail Authority and realized I really enjoyed the exposure to all the parts and pieces of a major project — from negotiations with contractors to conversations with the public.

From that, I realized that understanding the bigger picture was a compelling way to bring value to projects. While I could have been perfectly happy being a great bridge engineer, rather than focusing on the details of bridge design I preferred to be the bridge between the engineers, environmental scientists, attorneys, stakeholders and so on. I realized I was developing a unique skill set and I was hooked.

**Q. What advice do you have for anyone considering a career in program management?**

**A.** A lot of people can be intimidated by a billion-dollar-plus program and I understand why delivering a big program can feel scary; you're helping a group of people make complicated decisions so it's not like getting out your manuals and analytically working a design problem. What's exciting is leaning into those unknowns and working through them to achieve the overall goals of the program.

The big-picture management approach that's required for a billion-dollar program is a completely different skillset than the detailed approach required to be successful in design or even in managing smaller projects. The best way to learn to deliver these large programs is through experience gained on the job.

I've been fortunate to have good mentors and have reflected on how instrumental they have been in my growth. They tapped me on the shoulder for opportunities, made sure I felt supported, invited me to experience and participate in things that might have been "above my pay grade." I can think of so many examples where intentionally providing opportunities for people has built careers, and this benefits the person, the organization and the community.

To early career people — seek out these expert mentors and ask lots of questions. Don't be afraid to try new things, even if it's totally different than what you thought you'd be doing with your career. If you don't like it, no big deal — go back to what you were doing before or try something else! But you'll never know unless you try.

To leaders — watch for opportunities to intentionally set out stepping stones to prepare younger staff to experience new situations, see the bigger picture, and grow their readiness for responsibility.

*Experts Talk is an interview series with technical leaders from across our Transportation program. Each interview illuminates a different aspect of transportation infrastructure planning, design and delivery. Contact [HDRTransportation@hdrinc.com](mailto:HDRTransportation@hdrinc.com) for more information. Visit [www.hdrinc.com/insights](http://www.hdrinc.com/insights) regularly to gain insights from specialized experts and thought leaders behind our award-winning, full service consulting practice.*