PROGRAM MANAGEMENT: FROM INTENT TO VALUE

By Fernando Graf – Program Manager

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Program management is a lot like running a marathon. You cannot rush through it, and you cannot rely on bursts of energy to carry you to the finish. Every phase requires preparation, pacing, and clear intention. Just as a runner studies the course, manages their energy, and adjusts with every mile, a program manager plans each stage with care, executes with discipline, and moves steadily toward the goal. When you treat a complex program like a marathon instead of a sprint, you give yourself the best chance of crossing the finish line strong.

Every successful program relies on a clear structure that guides how work begins, evolves, and ultimately delivers value. Just as a long-distance runner prepares, plans, and adapts across different stages of the race, a strong program follows a sequence of deliberate steps. Each phase builds on the one before, ensuring that decisions are grounded, execution is focused, and progress is sustainable. The path typically unfolds through the following stages:

- Foundation

Begin by understanding where the organization truly stands. Assess overall maturity, review the current environment, and establish the principles that will

guide every decision that follows. This phase creates the baseline that all future work will be built upon.

- ● Strategy and Discovery

Shape the vision for where the program needs to go. Clarify the most important priorities, identify the outcomes that matter, and determine the tools, methods, team, and structures required to support them. This is where intent becomes a practical blueprint.

- ● Implementation

Put the plan into motion. Introduce the selected tools, enable teams through meaningful training, and strengthen processes so they support consistent execution. The focus here is to bring the strategy to life in a way people can use it day-to-day.

- ● Optimization

Study the results and adjust with purpose. Track performance, refine practices that need improvement, and expand what is working well across the organization. This is the continuous improvement stage that keeps the program evolving and delivering value.

Finally, ongoing program management focuses on keeping the work steady and moving in the right direction. It involves guiding day-to-day execution, managing risks and issues before they grow, keeping stakeholders informed with clear reporting, and helping teams adapt to change so the program continues to progress with confidence.

Now, let's review each phase in more detail.

FOUNDATION

The Foundation phase is the most critical stage of any program because it establishes the ground on which every later decision and action will stand. Just as a marathon runner studies the terrain, understands their current fitness, and outlines a plan for pacing the race, an organization must begin its program journey with a clear, honest view of its starting point. Without this grounding, later strategies, tools, and execution steps risk becoming disconnected from reality and ultimately ineffective.

The first step in this phase is gaining a full picture of where the organization currently is. This means assessing overall maturity across people, processes, systems, and culture. A

maturity assessment is not simply a checklist. It is an opportunity to uncover strengths that can support the program and gaps that may slow momentum or create risks. Leaders often assume they know their maturity level, but structured assessment frequently reveals misalignment in how different groups perceive the organization. These insights help form a shared truth that everyone can work from.

Along with maturity, it is important to study the broader environment in which the program will operate. This includes the organizational structure, existing ways of working, ongoing projects, and the expectations of leadership and stakeholders. In many cases, programs fail not because the plan was poor but because the environment was not understood. For example, teams may already be overwhelmed with competing priorities, or technology systems may have hidden limitations. The Foundation phase brings these realities to the surface so they can be addressed early rather than discovered mid-implementation.

A key outcome of this phase is the creation of guiding principles. These are the statements that define how the program will operate, make decisions, and interact with the organization. Guiding principles act as a compass for every conversation and help teams stay aligned when challenges arise or when new choices need to be made. Examples of guiding principles may include simplicity of processes, transparency in communication, focus on long-term value, or consistency in tool adoption. They do not need to be lengthy. They simply need to reflect the values and priorities that the program will stand upon.

At this stage, it is helpful to document the blueprints for how the program will function, which may include the following deliverables:

- An overview of current maturity and opportunities for improvement
- A summary of strengths and challenges in the existing environment
- A clear set of guiding principles that will anchor every stage of work
- A shared understanding of goals, constraints, and expectations

This documentation becomes the reference point for the rest of the journey. As the program moves into Strategy, Design, Implementation, and Optimization, these foundational elements ensure that work remains consistent, focused, and aligned with what the organization truly needs.

Benefits Expected from the Program

- Greater visibility into purchase commitments; Purchase Orders will be visible from market
- Excel purchase book eliminated – every Order will be recorded and reported by the system
- Orders will be confirmed with supplier for total styles and quantities immediately after market
- Early tracking of incoming products before arrival at warehouse/distribution center
- Eliminating purchasing Director's approvals; streamlining and enabling a faster process
- Enabling electronic order receipt confirmation and ASN from supplier via EDI
- Shifting responsibility for generating orders to the Buyers instead of Central Merchandising
- Process flexibility via the possibility to make changes on the Purchase Orders and communicate them to vendors
- Ability to react immediately to Customer Demand by allocating orders 2-6 weeks before shipping

From Complex To Simplified
From Lack of Visibility to Full Visibility and Accountability

Figure 1 – Example of a Program's Goals

Figure 1 provides an example of a Supply Chain purchasing improvement project that brought under management $200m in assortment purchases for a premier luxury retailer. In the project, we clearly articulated the guiding principles for all stakeholders and laid out the benefits the program was expected to create. This was reviewed in monthly steering committee meetings and provided a clear guideline for the team on what was important for us to achieve with the program.

Another important element of the Foundation phase is stakeholder alignment. At this early point, leaders and sponsors need a unified understanding of the program's purpose and why the work matters. If alignment is not built now, disagreements later may slow progress or cause teams to push in different directions. Through workshops, interviews, and collaborative sessions, the Foundation phase helps create shared commitment and readiness for what comes next.

Finally, the Foundation phase sets expectations for the pace and structure of the program. It helps define how decisions will be made, how progress will be measured, and how success will be evaluated. When an organization understands its starting point, clarifies its principles, and aligns its stakeholders, the path ahead becomes far more predictable. It reduces surprises, builds confidence, and creates a supportive environment where future phases can succeed.

In short, the Foundation phase is where clarity begins. It is where an organization takes the time to understand itself, align its leaders, and establish the rules of the road. Without this step, even the best strategy or the most advanced tools may fail to deliver their intended

impact. With it, every stage that follows stands on solid ground and is far more likely to produce long-lasting results.

STRATEGY AND DISCOVERY

The Strategy and Discovery phase transforms understanding into direction. Once the organization has a clear view of its current state and the principles that will guide its work, the next step is shaping a vision for where the program needs to go. This phase is about defining what success looks like, choosing what matters most, and crafting the structure the program will use to get there. It is the point where broad intent becomes a practical and actionable blueprint.

The heart of this phase lies in clarifying priorities. Most organizations have more needs than they have capacity, and programs can quickly lose focus if everything is treated as equally important. Strategy and Discovery forces a thoughtful conversation about what truly matters and why. Priorities may include improving delivery speed, enhancing quality, reducing operational risk, unifying tools, or strengthening governance. Whatever they are, they must be chosen with intention and grounded in the reality uncovered during the Foundation phase. Clear priorities keep teams aligned and help avoid wasted effort throughout the lifespan of the program.

With priorities in place, the next step is defining the outcomes the program aims to achieve. Outcomes differ from activities or tasks. They focus on the value the program will deliver, not just the work it will complete. Outcomes may include increased transparency in reporting, more predictable delivery cycles, cost savings, revenue growth, higher stakeholder satisfaction, or smoother collaboration across teams. By clearly defining outcomes, the program establishes a shared vision of what "good" looks like. This vision becomes a guiding light that helps teams make decisions when faced with competing demands or unexpected challenges.

Strategy and Discovery also involves determining the tools, methods, and structures that will support the program. This includes selecting the frameworks the organization will follow, the processes that will shape daily work, and the systems that will enable consistent and scalable execution. For example, the organization may decide to introduce a new project management platform, redesign intake and prioritization processes, or implement a governance structure that ensures better decision-making. These choices must be made carefully. Tools should be chosen because they solve problems, not because they are trendy. Processes should be designed to simplify work, not add unnecessary complexity.

During this phase, it is also important to establish the operating model that the program will use. This includes setting expectations for roles and responsibilities, defining how teams will collaborate, and outlining how information will flow across the organization. The operating model ensures that everyone understands their part in the program and how their work connects to the larger picture. When roles are clear, collaboration improves, accountability strengthens, and the path from idea to execution becomes smoother.

Another valuable outcome of Strategy and Discovery is the creation of a roadmap. This roadmap outlines the sequence of work, the milestones that mark progress, and the interdependencies between initiatives. It does not need to be overly detailed, but it should provide enough structure to guide planning, resource allocation, and communication. The roadmap helps stakeholders understand what will happen, when it will happen, and how different elements of the program support one another. It builds confidence and ensures that the organization moves forward with purpose.
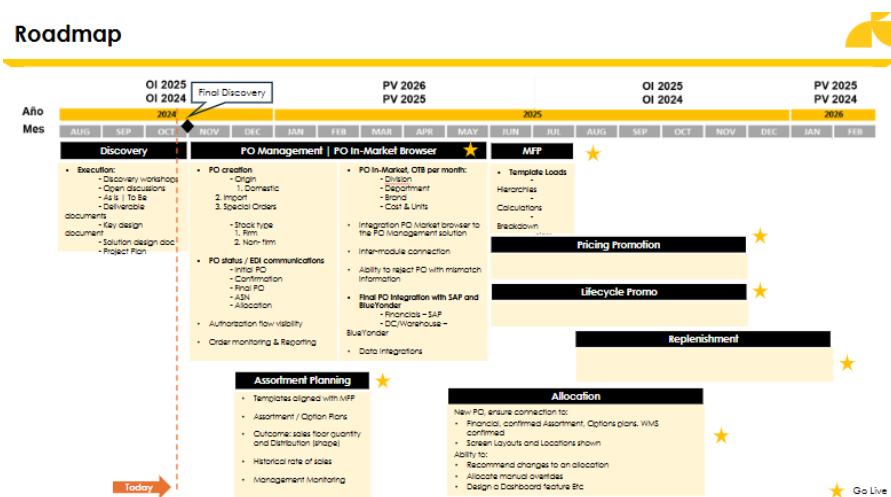

Figure 2 – Example of a Roadmap

As depicted in Figure 2, a complex program roadmap can be articulated in a simple and yet powerful single slide. In this example, we cover transformations involving Purchasing optimization, Warehouse Management improvements, Planning, Pricing and Promotion, and Allocation and Replenishment. These are core processes of a business, which makes for a very complex program. In my experience, depicting a complex program in a single slide is an art that pays dividends as it makes the major milestones and phases clear for the team and executives to review and understand.

Finally, a strong program depends on selecting a team that is both capable and fully committed. Choosing the right functional and technical leads is essential because these individuals shape decision-making, guide daily execution, and influence how well the organization adapts to change. Team members must bring real experience, not simply hold

a title, and they must be able to dedicate the time and focus the project requires. It is equally important that each person understands why the change matters and actively supports it. Programs often struggle when participants are involved in name only, offering limited engagement or accountability. Building a team with genuine ownership, clear roles, and consistent availability creates the foundation for steady progress and successful outcomes.

Strategy and Discovery cannot be created in isolation. Throughout this phase, collaboration is essential. It requires input from leaders, teams, and stakeholders who understand the day-to-day realities of the organization. Through workshops, interviews, and working sessions, the program team gathers perspectives that shape a strategy that is both ambitious and achievable. This shared creation process also helps foster early buy-in, which is critical for later adoption.

As this phase comes to a close, the program should have a complete blueprint that includes:

- Clear priorities that align with organizational goals
- Defined outcomes that explain what success looks like
- A structured approach that outlines tools, processes, and methods
- An operating model that assigns roles, responsibilities, and collaboration paths
- A roadmap that guides the sequence and timing of work
- Selection of a team that is both capable and fully committed
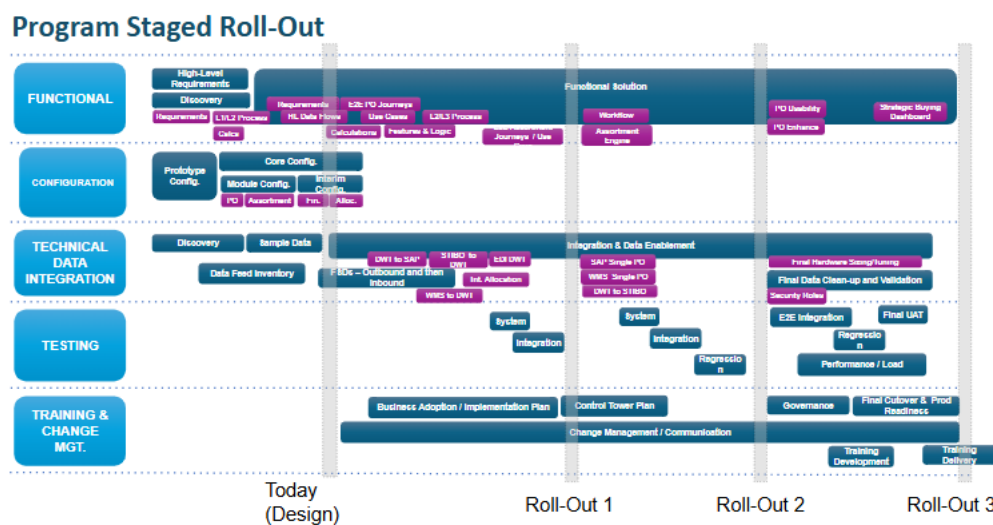
Together, these elements give the program direction, structure, and clarity. They ensure that the work ahead is intentional rather than reactive and that every decision supports the larger purpose of the program.

In essence, the Strategy and Discovery phase moves the organization from understanding to planning. It shapes vision, aligns priorities, and creates the blueprint that guides all later phases. When done well, it ensures that implementation is purposeful, that teams stay aligned, and that the program is positioned to deliver meaningful and lasting impact.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Implementation phase is where planning turns into action. After building a solid foundation and shaping a clear strategy and discovery, the organization is ready to put the plan into motion. This is often the most visible and active stage of the program because it involves introducing new tools, training teams, adjusting processes, and ensuring that day-

to-day work aligns with the vision defined earlier. Implementation is where strategy becomes real. It is where people begin to see, feel, and experience the change.

The first major activity in this phase is deploying the selected tools and technologies that will support the program. These may include project management platforms, reporting solutions, new systems, or methods for communication and collaboration. Introducing tools is not simply a technical exercise. It requires careful planning, thoughtful configuration, and a deep understanding of how people currently work. Tools should enhance efficiency and clarity, not increase complexity. For this reason, pilot groups, feedback cycles, and staged rollouts often help ensure smoother adoption and early improvements before a full-scale launch.

Figure 3 – Program with 3 Staged Roll-Outs

For example, a staged roll-out can be planned in waves. In an optimization of manufacturing processes for a $1 billion major rigid packaging manufacturer, we planned the rollout in three distinct phases. Figure 3 shows an example of such roll-out. Going from top left and then down towards the right, we depict the capabilities in the verticals that would be implemented preceding each roll-out. At the very bottom of the picture, you see the timeframe for the roll-outs starting with the marker showing Today (Design). This approach de-risked the program significantly by trying capabilities incrementally and validating the project as early as Roll-Out 1. Instead of waiting for a big go-live at the end, we were able to test out theories and adapt the program as necessary for complete success in Roll-Out 3.

Training and enablement form the core of successful implementation. Even the most powerful tool or well-designed process will fail if people do not understand how to use it or

why it matters. Training should be meaningful rather than superficial. It should connect the dots between what teams are learning and how it will improve their daily work. Effective enablement includes hands-on sessions, reference guides, open office hours, coaching, and opportunities for teams to ask questions and practice. The goal is confidence. When people feel prepared, adoption increases and resistance decreases.

Strengthening processes is another essential component of this phase. The program must ensure that workflows, roles, and responsibilities support consistent execution. This involves updating procedures, clarifying who owns what, and removing outdated steps that add little value. Process refinement should aim to make the work smoother and clearer. It should reduce confusion, eliminate bottlenecks, and support predictable outcomes. During implementation, it is important to stay flexible. Early use of new processes may reveal opportunities for improvement that were not apparent during design. The program team should be ready to adjust based on real user feedback.

Communication plays a significant role throughout implementation. Stakeholders need regular updates on progress, timelines, wins, and areas that require attention. Clear communication builds trust and helps teams understand how the implementation is unfolding. It also prepares the organization for upcoming changes so that no one feels surprised or uninformed. Effective communication should answer the questions people care most about: what is changing, why it is changing, how it affects them, and what support is available.

Program Communication Plan

What	Internal / With Client	Who / suggested	Day	Objective
Project Internal Call - weekly	Internal – Project team	Fernando, Max, David, Bob, Dan(s), Mohamed, Hamid, + Project team	Monday	Review plan, issues, risks, deliverables, etc.
Project Call – weekly	With Client	Fernando, Max, David, Bob, Dan M. Dan D. (optional)	Tuesday	Weekly overall project status update, review plan
Technical Call – weekly	With Client	Fernando, Mohamed, Max, Dan M., Hamid	Tuesday	Weekly technical reviews and discussion, plan status
Executive – weekly	With Client	Fernando Dan D. (optional)	Thursday	Discussion/update with client sponsor – CFO
Status Report Email - weekly	Email to leaders	Fernando	Friday	Project status – items for our internal consideration

Figure 4 – Program Communication Schedule

Developing, communicating, and executing an effective communication plan brings clarity and continuity of momentum to the program. As shown in Figure 4, it is important to articulate the communication plan to stakeholders so they know what to expect. Sticking to the plan, when things are good or bad with the program, brings a level of appreciation

and engagement that pays tremendous dividends. Executives appreciate the updates and can engage as necessary to help remove issues or barriers to success. Informed teams can execute tasks more effectively. Stakeholders that understand the status of a program become empowered to support it and speak about it with the correct and latest information.

During this phase, the program team must closely monitor progress and resolve issues quickly. Challenges will appear. Tools may require adjustments. Training may need to be expanded. Processes may need further simplification. The Implementation phase is dynamic, and success depends on the ability to respond in real time. The more closely the program team watches adoption and listens to feedback, the more smoothly the organization will transition to new ways of working.

It is also important to build momentum. Early wins help reinforce confidence and demonstrate that the program is delivering value. These wins may take the form of improved visibility in reporting, faster approval cycles, or better alignment across teams. Celebrating progress keeps morale high and encourages teams to stay committed to the changes.

By the end of the Implementation phase, the organization should have:

- Tools that are configured, deployed, and actively used
- Teams that are trained, confident, and supported
- Processes that are refined, clarified, and aligned with program goals
- Communication channels that provide transparency and build trust
- Early evidence that the strategy is taking effect in daily work

This phase marks the shift from planning to practice. It is a period of transformation where new habits are formed and old patterns are replaced. When executed well, implementation brings stability, clarity, and renewed energy to the organization. It establishes the working model that later phases, especially Optimization, will continue to strengthen.

In essence, the Implementation phase is where the program comes to life. It is the moment when the organization begins to operate differently and when the vision designed in earlier stages starts to produce real and measurable change.

OPTIMIZATION

The Optimization phase is where continuous improvement becomes a natural part of the program. After implementation is complete and teams begin working with new tools,

processes, and structures, the organization enters a period of learning, refining, and strengthening. This phase is not about starting something new. It is about understanding what is happening, identifying where the program is creating value, and making purposeful adjustments that help the organization operate even more effectively. Optimization ensures that the program does not remain static but continues to grow, adapt, and deliver lasting impact.

The first component of this phase is studying the results. The program team needs to track performance across the areas that were defined during earlier phases. This may include speed of delivery, quality of outputs, clarity of reporting, stakeholder satisfaction, and alignment between teams. The goal is not to gather data for the sake of data. The goal is to understand behaviors, trends, challenges, and improvements. When organizations take time to analyze results, they can see where their investments are paying off and where new support may be needed.

Once results are understood, the next step is adjusting with purpose. Optimization is not reactive. It does not involve random changes or quick fixes. Instead, it requires thoughtful evaluation and deliberate refinement. Some processes may need to be simplified. Some tools may require additional configuration. Some teams may need refresher training or deeper guidance. These adjustments should be based on real patterns observed during daily use, not assumptions. Purposeful adjustments lead to meaningful improvements that reinforce consistency and confidence across the organization.
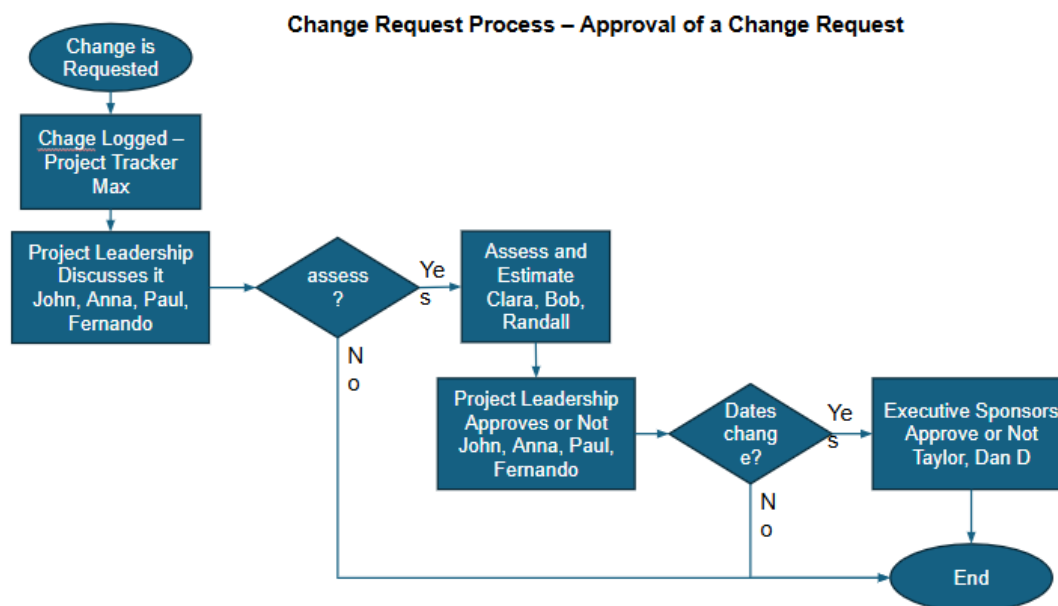

Figure 5 – Process for Changes Review

Establishing a process and clear accountability for the thoughtful evaluation and deliberate refinement with changes is a game-changer in successfully managing the optimization phase of a program. The process can be as simple as shown in Figure 5. The key is to communicate it in advance and then adhere to it. In a major ERP systems integration program, we knew that the optimization phase would be a difficult one due to the complexities and the very high number of systems involved in this particular program. We defined a clear change management process and were able to close optimization two months ahead of schedule because of this management process.

Another important component of this phase is strengthening practices that already work well. Every program has areas where adoption is strong and results are positive. Optimization helps expand these successes across teams and departments. For example, if one group demonstrates exceptional use of a new planning tool or delivers consistently high-quality reports, the program can use their approach as a model for others. High-performing teams can share their practices, mentor others, or help develop new standards. This creates a multiplier effect that accelerates improvement across the entire organization.

Optimization also focuses on reinforcing long-term sustainability. Programs often lose momentum once initial excitement fades. By keeping attention on improvement, the organization maintains engagement and prevents regression into old habits. This may involve refining governance, updating templates, refreshing training materials, or introducing small enhancements that improve daily work. Continuous improvement keeps the program fresh and relevant, even as business needs evolve.

Communication remains essential during this phase. Leaders and stakeholders need visibility into what is working, what is changing, and what benefits the program is delivering. Regular updates build trust and demonstrate that the program is not only active but improving over time. Transparency helps stakeholders feel connected and ensures that the organization understands the value of continued optimization.

At this stage, the program team should also look for opportunities to innovate. Once core practices are stable, the organization is better positioned to explore new possibilities. This may involve adopting advanced reporting methods, integrating additional tools, improving cross-team collaboration, or introducing new ways of planning and forecasting. Optimization encourages a forward-looking mindset where teams seek ways to improve rather than settling for the initial implementation.

By the end of the Optimization phase, the organization should have:

- Clear insight into results based on ongoing performance tracking

- Purposeful adjustments that strengthen tools, processes, and team capabilities
- Expanded adoption of successful practices across the organization
- Sustained engagement and stability in the new operating model
- A culture that supports continuous improvement

The Optimization phase is essential for long-term success. It ensures that the program continues to add value and remains aligned with the goals of the organization. Without this phase, even a well-implemented program may lose momentum or drift away from its purpose. With it, the program becomes stronger, more resilient, and more adaptable over time.

In essence, the Optimization phase turns the program into a living system. It is not a finish line. It is an ongoing cycle of learning, improving, and growing. Through consistent refinement and thoughtful enhancement, the organization continues to advance and deliver meaningful results long after the initial implementation is complete.

CONCLUSION

A successful program is not built on speed, luck, or isolated effort. It is built on a thoughtful journey that moves with purpose from understanding to planning, from planning to action, and from action to lasting improvement. Just as a marathon requires preparation, pacing, and persistence, program management follows a sequence of deliberate phases that guide the organization toward meaningful change.

The Foundation phase establishes truth. It uncovers where the organization stands, aligns leaders around a shared view, and sets the principles that shape every decision ahead. Strategy and Discovery takes this understanding and transforms it into a clear blueprint, defining priorities, outcomes, tools, and the overall structure that will guide the program. Implementation brings this blueprint to life. It equips teams, deploys the systems and processes that support daily work, and turns strategy into a real and visible transformation. Optimization ensures that the program continues to grow long after initial rollout. It strengthens what works, resolves what does not, and maintains momentum through consistent improvement.

Together, these phases form a complete path that carries an organization from intention to impact. They offer clarity in moments of uncertainty, structure in moments of complexity, and confidence in moments of change. When approached with discipline and care, this journey delivers more than new tools or new processes. It creates alignment, capability, and sustainable value.

In the end, program management is a long-distance effort that rewards preparation, patience, and continuous learning. By following these phases with intention, organizations position themselves not only to reach their goals but to remain strong, adaptable, and successful long after the finish line.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fernando Graf is a Senior Program Manager with 20+ years leading complex global technology, operations, and digital transformation initiatives. He combines MBA-level business strategy with deep technical expertise across SAP, SaaS, cloud, AI, supply chain, manufacturing, and retail enterprises. Fernando is known for turning underperforming environments into scalable, high-impact ecosystems that reduce cost, accelerate delivery, and unlock new revenue.

Career Impact Highlights: - **$300M+** combined revenue growth and cost savings delivered across Fortune 500 clients - On-time and on-budget SAP upgrade and integrations leadership in **multi-million** projects - Led development and launch of an AI SaaS platform achieving **430% sales growth** in 12 months - Directed M&A technology integrations generating **$100M+ in IT savings** - Proven leader of global teams across the US, LATAM, and Europe; fluent in English, Portuguese, Spanish; - Scrum Master Project Management certification, and Lean Green Belt and Ai/ML MIT course work.

The author's prior work, sources, and tools, including ChatGPT, were consulted and assisted in the writing of this article.