Evans

Progress Over Perfection

Episode 2: Taking Over a Program in Motion

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Series: Progress Over Perfection

Introduction

Jack: Hi, everybody. Welcome to the second episode of Progress Over Perfection. I'm Jack Moore, once again Managing Partner and co-owner of Evans, Inc.

Jack: Last episode, Shashuana and I dug into what happens when you're stuck waiting for perfect information. The short version: 70% confidence is enough to move. If you missed that episode, please go back and give it a listen.

Jack: Today we're going to get more specific. What happens when you inherit — or you're a consultant on — a federal program that's already in motion and nobody handed you the keys? The last PM left, maybe the documentation's a mess, the team's trying to figure out who you are as a leader. Are you actually going to lead, or are you just going to schedule a ton of meetings?

Jack: I'll be honest — I've definitely been on the wrong side of this. I've walked into situations where I spent the whole first week pretending to listen and learn. And the team, a week later, trusted me less because they didn't think I was really going to do anything. Turns out, doing nothing looks a lot like you don't care.

Jack: This matters right now because last year was a big turnover year in the federal government. Agencies saw over 300,000 separations against around 70,000 hires. That creates a massive continuity gap. People are stepping into these situations a lot more frequently — promoted, taking over a program that wasn't theirs, with no grace period to figure it out.

Jack: So I've brought in somebody who's done this a lot — and honestly, I think he's gotten a lot better at it than I ever was. Bob Etris is my business partner and fellow co-owner at Evans. Bob started his career here as a business analyst and has built his career through helping organizations move through change, helping some of our big clients through massive life cycle acquisitions, and generally improving program delivery. He's walked into a lot more messy handoffs than either of us can count — and made them move. Bob, welcome to Progress Over Perfection.

Bob: Thanks. I appreciate the kind intro. Made me sound more like a professional white-collar SWAT team member. I've got to figure out how to get that on the business card.

Jack: Yeah, you definitely should. It'd go right along with my Six Sigma thing that used to be there.

What It Feels Like to Step Into a Struggling Program

Jack: Before we start talking playbook, let's step back. When you first got brought into a big program with lots of different tentacles — what did that feel like? The first time versus where it eventually fell?

Bob: Honest answer: equal parts thrilling and terrifying. When an SES-level director or executive taps you and says, "Hey, I was told this is my number one priority — whether it's a $10 million program or a $10 billion program — you're going to come fix this with me," it's like: okay. That's a bright light shining on me now, 24-7.

Bob: But then the flip side is the practical: what is the pace, and how do you balance things? You start processing all the known unknowns. Those moments are also rarely planned. You're having a normal day, and then something drastically new starts. For me, it was a phone call at 6 p.m. from an executive who almost never called. They said, “Etris, I’m out here on the West Coast. This whiteboard is covered with process flows. I have no idea what’s going on. Clear the calendar next week because you’re coming out here and we need to get started on figuring this out.” And then he hung up. No pleasantries.

Bob’s First-48-Hours Playbook

Jack: As you got into these situations, you developed a rhythm. What became your approach? What are you trying to get done in the first 48 hours?

Bob: There are certain core attributes that go into a repeatable process. Let me walk through them.

Bob: Step one: get super clear on the communication related to whatever change in roles is happening, and make sure it’s clearly understood by all the right people. Is this person on a six-month detail? Are they no kidding in charge? Are they in some kind of advisory capacity? When leadership, responsibility, accountability, and authority get muddled, you lose time and it costs money. People don’t know who to go to or how decisions are made. First thing is clarity.

Bob: Step two: get as much information as you can on who’s doing what — not just from the org chart. Org charts are useful as a reference point, but you want the people who understand how things actually work. Who’s the go-to for the key things? Have real conversations about where the personnel problems on the program are and what needs to be done to address them.

Bob: Step three: understand the dollars and people makeup of the program. Know the budget, know where the financial challenges are, know where the personnel needs are — both shortages and people problems. Also understand who the influencers are. Stakeholder management is really just figuring out where your allies are and where you need to spend more time.

Bob: Step four: have a plain-English, don’t-sugarcoat-it conversation on what are the real issues in the next 30 days that need immediate attention. Are people working on those? When a new leader comes in, people are hesitant to raise bad news — they want to feel you out, they don’t want to seem like they’re dumping problems on you. Those voice tracks aren’t helpful. You have to ask the question to create the space for them to give you the information you need.

Bob: Step five: the flip side of that last coin — what's the stuff over the horizon, 90 days or six months out, that the team is already worried you're behind schedule on? Even though it's not a next-week problem, it will become a drive-off-a-cliff problem if you don't figure out how to get it back on track. Those things can be hiding until they're not anymore. You run into an invisible brick wall you weren't expecting to see.

Deciding Who to Talk To and Building Trust Early

Jack: How do you approach deciding who to talk to in those initial conversations? How are you establishing trust with that core group?

Bob: First, you have to talk as early as possible to the people in various lead roles on that org chart. That's your team, whether it's ideal or not. You need a foundational understanding of those people and their backgrounds.

Bob: Related to that — but independent of the org chart — work your own human network. Reach out to the people you trust. The people you'd text jokes to over the weekend. The people you've worked with for a long time, who if you called them and said you need something, they'd be there. Map out who on that list might know people on this program you've been tossed into and start working the phones. "Have you worked with these folks before? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Are there undercurrents — people who have history with each other, cultures that clash across lines of business?" That stuff doesn't jump out unless you talk to people. You're never going to see in a risk register that Sally can't stand Jeff and they've been fighting for weeks and that's why you're four weeks behind schedule. But people will talk about it.

Bob: Assume out of the gate that no one's trying to do a bad job. Most people got the job they have because they believe in the mission on some level. Any leader's job in those early weeks is to identify the perceived underperformers and see what you can do to help them — while at the same time leaning on the accelerators you know you're going to need to drive success.

Jack: That reminds me of a program I started — private sector, but a large company that acted a lot like a federal agency. I had my list of people, and I made a choice to meet with the people I needed to win over twice as frequently as the stakeholders who were already bought in. What I found was that a lot of those people had never had somebody spend time understanding what the program was trying to accomplish and listening to their concerns about how it would impact their team. It worked over well. A lesson I carried forward to Evans.

Story: Breaking Through Fort Knox

Bob: That totally resonates. Short story, I promise. Goes back to that executive who called me: "Etris, you're flying out next week." About four to six months into that gig, one of the things I'd been asked to help fix was a massive requirements activity for a system used by thousands of air traffic controllers. They were four months in, had a month left, and no one had confidence it was going to get done on time. I got involved, started building relationships. And I could tell the lead of this entire activity could not stand me.

Bob: I tried everything. Humor. Doing things for them before they asked. Suggesting we get coffee. What can I do to help? I felt like I was being avoided, canceled on, not included. And the executive is asking: "How is this going?" In my head: it's going really poorly. I cannot break through the Fort Knox of this team.

Bob: Then one day we were walking from headquarters to an offsite facility for one of the final requirements sessions. I finally just said: "Hey. I feel like this isn't landing the right way. I just want you to know — I want the work to be successful. I'm not here to do what your boss's boss said. I get the distinct sense you don't think I'm needed, and that's totally fine. But they asked me to come help make this successful. I'm here to help you be successful. I'll do whatever you think makes sense."

Bob: And somehow that opened the door. He went on this tirade — couldn't stand his boss, the guy who had called me in. We commiserated over his frustrations. And once he was able to vent, we were totally cool ever since. My only point: spending time with those people takes time to find the angle, to get some common ground you can really work from.

Jack: Navigating that — being asked to do something by the person paying the bills, then going in and realizing the environment is a little different than what you'd been told — is another nuance of this. But at the end of the day, the boss and the person you're working with closely both want the program to succeed. Some of the details don't really matter when you're focused on that shared goal.

Distinguishing Real Urgency from Noise

Jack: Let's talk about something that happens after you've been there a week or so — people have different ways of expressing urgency. How do you distinguish between something that sounds urgent because a couple of loud voices are talking about it, versus something that really needs to be on the "get done in 30 days" list?

Bob: Distinguishing perceived urgency from things that actually require attention is critical. Urgency is completely relative to the perspective of the person raising the topic. What's urgent for a senior systems engineer with a release date hurtling toward them is very different from what's considered urgent for the COO of a 60,000-person agency who's about to brief The Hill.

Bob: One: you have to define urgency for people in the moment. Not dictate to them what it means — ask questions to understand what they really mean by it. To do that well, you need situational awareness both laterally across programs in the portfolio and vertically in terms of priorities above and below you on the org chart. Urgency changes — daily, weekly, monthly — particularly in this environment.

Bob: Two: ask lots of questions to understand: if this urgent thing is not resolved, what's the impact? I've found that impact statements often start fairly abstractly. "If we don't get funding by this date, this milestone nine months from now is blown." My mind immediately goes to: is it that binary? If you don't get a couple million dollars by Friday, is something nine months from now truly irreconcilable? Usually we can work around it.

Bob: A lot of times, urgent issues being raised is almost a metaphor for 'you're not paying attention to me.' The only way to get a decision made is to make the thing sound more urgent than maybe it actually is.

Jack: That makes a lot of sense. I remember situations where someone told me something was 'medium term' and their medium term was a week — while someone else's short term was the next 30 days. These huge programs can have long terms measured in years. Important to align on what those words actually mean.

Jack's Story: The Business Case That Built Trust

Jack: Here's a story from early in my career at Evans. I was asked to get launched into a program in another part of the agency that we'd decided needed to come under the enterprise PMO. The directorate that had been running it — their PM felt punished. Like: "You're telling me I wasn't doing a good enough job?"

Jack: The documentation was a bit of a mess. They were relatively early in the program life cycle and didn't really have a compelling business case. I basically said: "You've got to go in front of the Resources Council in the next two weeks. Let me help you make this case." I focused on the deliverable they needed to get the funding to move forward.

Jack: That helped — similar to what you were describing. I'm on your side. I know you're not happy your program got pulled under the PMO, but I'm just trying to help. And once I asked, they had more documentation than I'd expected. By the end of that week, we'd built the compelling business case they needed and prepped them to present to the Resources Council. They got the funding. Setting that tone — you may be unhappy with the person who sent me, but I'm here to help you — opened the door.

Bob: Not that you were using these exact words, but there's a theme in both our examples: lead with humility and a form of partnership. Everyone in these situations wants this thing to be successful. If humility and partnership create a focus on the mission — and you're competent — then gradually you can typically get to a place of working successfully together. Not always lifelong best friends, but those are the key ingredients to alignment even when individual motivations aren't in the same place.

Early Wins: Building Momentum on an Off-the-Rails Program

Jack: We're trying to establish momentum. What are some examples of early wins you've sought to accomplish to get an off-the-rails program back on the rails?

Bob: I've found they fall into one of two categories. Category A: think about the iceberg visual. You can only see a little bit above the water; the rest is underneath. When programs or people are perceived as underperforming, that's usually based on what's above the water. What's driving that perception often comes back to storytelling. The program is unable to articulate — in a way leadership understands — what they're needing or why they're struggling. Nine times out of ten, a huge component of the misalignment is the inability to tell stories about their program and how things are going.

Bob: Category B: if you can show the team that by understanding their problems, you have the skill set to actually help them solve those problems — to get stuff out of the way so they can keep moving — whether they want you there or not, they start to think, "Okay. You're useful." If you can triage those problems and show that you can lead without authority and bring people together to solve something in a timely manner, that's where you start to win hearts and minds.

Bob: The challenge for any of us in these situations is that it takes extra time and energy when you're new to understand their mission, their world, their domain as rapidly as possible. You can be an amazing communication specialist who can craft gorgeous briefings. But if you don't know enough about the technical content, you're about as useful as used gum in the moment. The onus is on us as the new people to show that we're doing everything we can to understand their world — because if we don't understand their problems the same way they do, we're not speaking the same language.

Building a Healthy Team Business Rhythm

Jack: One of the things we always talk about at Evans is our human-centered approach. Part of our ability to succeed is developing relationships top to bottom in the program organization. How do you approach understanding more about that team and how they're communicating — to help them develop a better business rhythm?

Bob: The people diagnostic piece is really important because that's what makes things move. One useful tactic: once you get through a challenging situation to the other side, take the time to do a short group debrief — call it lessons learned, call it whatever. "Why was that so challenging?" None of us want to live firefighting day in and day out. How do we turn an event into a process? Because a lot of this stuff can be predictable. If it can be, let's perform our work accordingly. That helps you understand people's strengths and weaknesses, where the challenges are, where resources aren't allocated the right way.

Bob: Another critical piece: some form of off-site — putting people in management and leadership roles who have to work closely together as a group, on a recurring and predictable basis, so you can talk about long-term needs together and grow in your understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Working relationships are like any other relationship. As you spend time with people, it's easier to work with them, and you grow to trust one another. Without that, if it's purely transactional over email and meetings, it's possible — but it's going to take a whole lot longer.

Closing: Three Moves for a Program Manager's First Week

Jack: Take the persona: you're a program manager being asked to step into a program and it's Monday. What are the first three things you want to get done to show some success by Friday?

Bob: One: have a 30-60-90 day plan, while recognizing that plan needs to be dynamic. Leaders who show up as 'I don't want to slow things down — I want to understand the real no-kidding challenges you're facing, and I don't want the sugar-coated version' — the more you can understand that in days rather than weeks, the more you'll have a real grasp of what's actually going on. Give people the space to raise the real issues that you might hear at the bar or over lunch but that don't show up in PowerPoints.

Bob: Two: the lack of bad information doesn't mean things are fine. The hair-on-fire issue nobody talked about — it's probably a thing the right people weren't focusing on because there were other things actually on fire. As you're getting up to speed, reserve enough time and attention to focus on things that might sound fine now but might not be fine pretty soon.

Bob: Three: by the end of that first week, have a pretty clear understanding of what's the prioritized list you can validate with your management team — "Based on everyone's input, these are the things I need to focus on. This is number one, this is number two. What do you all think?" If you can get to a practical action plan rapidly — one that's aligned to both what the agency needs from a mission standpoint and their actual concerns — that's where you start to win hearts and minds. Show value immediately. Because the more you can do that, the more they will believe in your ability to be helpful — which like we've been talking about is the necessary starting point.

Bob: Long term, that breeds trust from the higher levels. In government: if senior leadership trusts that you're focused on the right things, have a good story, are making progress, and delivering against expectations — what comes with that is more support and resources, which is what every team wants, especially when they feel like they're struggling.

Jack: Awesome. All right, Bob. Great place to land. Thank you for doing this — not surprisingly, I enjoyed the conversation. For those of you listening, go to evansinc.com to learn more about the work Bob and I and our company do with the federal government. If you're a federal program manager — or somebody like us helping one — pick one of those three moves Bob talked about and try it. That's Progress Over Perfection. Until next time.

Progress Over Perfection is Evans' podcast for federal leaders making consequential decisions under uncertainty. New episodes explore how the best program managers, agency leaders, and modernization teams move from analysis to action.