

Partnering to Embrace Client Culture

Program Management for Denver International Airport's Concourse Expansion

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As airports plan more complex, large-scale expansion programs to support increasing passenger demand, effective program management acquires a new level of importance.

When Denver International Airport (DEN) initiated a \$1.5 billion program in 2017 to develop 39 new gates across all three of its concourses, top management put program management in the forefront to steer the Concourse Expansion Program (CEP). These gates will support the growing passenger flow at DEN—the fifth busiest airport in the United States. More than 64 million passengers travelled through DEN in 2018, a five-percent increase from 2017. The additional gates will expand capacity by approximately 30 percent, to support the projected 80 million passengers by 2025.

Due to the scope and complexity of the CEP, DEN management understood it was time to take a closer look at the program management practices in place to assess what changes should be implemented. DEN concluded that commitment from leadership was not enough; the whole CEP organization had to be on board with the program management approach and process.

Advancing Beyond Silos

Done right, program management keeps essential processes on schedule to reach objectives on time and to return the best value for investment. The definition is clear, but reaching the desired outcome requires flexibility, to understand and work with each client's organizational culture. This partnering ingredient is essential in today's complex airport environments, many comprised of diverse stakeholders accustomed to functioning in silos. Program management built on partnering catalyzes synergy to deliver the desired outcome.

Ultimate success requires everyone in the program to see themselves as partners. The DEN Concourse Expansion Program includes more than 1,400 people so far—top management and multilevel teams, from engineers and field workers to the joint venture construction managers. All must engage and commit to core principles, practices and priorities toward targeted objectives. Building success requires leadership buy-in, organizational commitment and a cohesive cultural mindset.

At DEN, setting and communicating expectations from the start was key to fostering constructive day-to-day communication and a like-minded approach to issue resolution, to keep work on track toward completing the CEP by the end of the fourth quarter of 2021. With a game plan in place, DEN believed that program management would cultivate a collaborative mindset to continuously inform people's approach to work and the interaction between colleagues on all CEP teams.

DEN team member partnership surveys, issued at least quarterly or in response when problem areas are identified, and a monthly project scorecard together form the backbone of the program management partnering effort for the CEP. The surveys provide anonymous feedback with the opportunity to communicate specific areas in need of improvement. Scorecards indicate how well partnering is proceeding and provide robust metrics to gauge attainment of objectives. Results are discussed and made transparent throughout the entire CEP workforce.

Quantitative measurements concerning budget, schedule and safety are regularly assessed. DEN management also routinely relies on qualitative measurements to indicate how the work culture is becoming increasingly collaborative. Thus far, though still an evolving effort, the program management process itself is already identifying areas for improvement, including the need to better engage various layers of the CEP organization.

One key area where the partnering aspect of the CEP program management has made a positive impact is conflict resolution. For example, after a particularly difficult negotiation related to finalizing a contractor staffing task order, rather than retreating into silos and hunkering down, both teams maintained an open line of communication. Their commitment to partner, placing the project first, enabled the project to progress without interruption or project derailment. The primary positive impact of the program management process can be measured at this all-important person-to-person level where problem solving leads to both time savings and cost savings.

To support the ultimate success of the Concourse Expansion Program, communicating and incorporating lessons learned enables everyone in the CEP effort to benefit, as a partnering mindset evolves, to become ingrained in the organizational culture.

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