Program Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Program manager interviews in Australia typically probe your ability to coordinate multiple projects, manage governance and communicate with senior stakeholders. Expect a mix of behavioural questions about dependency and risk management, scenario questions about competing priorities, and technical questions about tools like Microsoft Project or benefits tracking.

- **Process:** How you define scope, map dependencies and consolidate budgets into a single program view.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of managing risk, escalation and stakeholder conflict across projects.
- **Scenario:** Judgement under pressure when projects compete for budget, resources or executive attention.
- **Technical:** Familiarity with tools such as Microsoft Project, Jira, Smartsheet, SAP or Tableau.
- **Client-facing or executive:** How you report status and benefits realisation to a steering committee or sponsor.

Usually a phone screen with a recruiter, then a panel interview with the program sponsor and a senior project manager. Some employers ask for a short presentation on a past program. A final round with an executive director may follow.

1. Walk me through how you define program scope, objectives and success measures with a sponsor.

Why they ask

This is a core process question that tests whether you can translate a strategic goal into a governed program with clear boundaries.

How to structure your answer

Use a step by step walk through: start with the sponsor's strategic intent, then define outcomes, success measures, scope boundaries, governance structure and reporting cadence.

Example answer

“I start by sitting down with the sponsor to understand the business outcome they want to achieve, not just the projects they think are needed. I ask what success looks like in twelve months and how it will be measured. From there I draft a program brief that sets out objectives, scope, success measures and the governance structure, including who sits on the steering committee. I then run that draft past key stakeholders to check for gaps before the first project is chartered. On a recent program, this process helped us drop one proposed project because it did not directly contribute to the agreed outcome, which saved time and budget.”

2. Tell me about a time you identified a dependency between two projects that was at risk of causing a delay. How did you handle it?

Why they ask

Dependency management is the defining task of a program manager, so interviewers want a concrete example.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on how you spotted the dependency, what you did to mitigate it, and the measurable outcome.

Example answer

“On a program to roll out a new customer platform, I noticed that the data migration project was waiting on the identity management project to finalise its API, but neither project manager had flagged the link. I called a joint workshop, mapped the dependency on a shared timeline, and we agreed to bring forward the API freeze by two weeks. I then added a standing dependency review to the weekly program meeting. As a result, the migration stayed on schedule and we avoided a three week delay to the program's go live date.”

3. You have three projects behind schedule and a fixed budget. How do you decide where to focus?

Why they ask

This scenario question tests judgement under pressure and your ability to prioritise based on program level outcomes.

How to structure your answer

Use a judgement under pressure structure: assess impact on the overall program benefit, identify critical path, consider contractual or regulatory deadlines, then consult the sponsor and decide.

Example answer

“First I would look at which project has the greatest impact on the program's overall benefit and which one sits on the critical path. I would also check if any have contractual or regulatory deadlines that cannot move. Then I would bring the three project managers together to review options: can we reallocate resources, descope non essential features, or accept a delay on the lowest impact project? I would take a recommendation to the sponsor with clear trade offs. In a similar situation, I focused resources on the project that unlocked the benefits case and negotiated a two week extension on a back office project, which kept the overall program within budget.”

4. How do you consolidate budget forecasts from multiple project managers into a single program view?

Why they ask

This technical question tests your financial control and tool skills, which are essential for program level reporting.

How to structure your answer

Walk through your process: gather data from project managers, use a consistent template, reconcile differences, apply contingency, and report variances to the steering committee.

Example answer

“I ask each project manager to submit their forecast in a standard template that matches the program's chart of accounts. I then consolidate the figures in a single spreadsheet or use Microsoft Project and SAP where required, checking for double counting and committed costs. I compare the consolidated forecast to the program budget and investigate any variance over a set threshold. Finally, I prepare a one page summary for the steering committee showing forecast, actuals and variance by project. In my last role, this process helped me identify a five percent overspend in one workstream early enough to reallocate contingency without affecting the overall program.”

5. Describe a time you had to escalate a risk to senior leadership. What was the outcome?

Why they ask

Escalation is a core program manager responsibility, so interviewers want to see you can do it constructively.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR, but emphasise your judgement about when to escalate and how you framed the issue with a recommended mitigation.

Example answer

"A vendor on a program was consistently missing delivery milestones, and I judged that the risk was beyond my authority to resolve because it involved a contract variation. I prepared a one page risk brief for the steering committee that set out the issue, the potential impact on the program timeline, three options and my recommendation. The committee approved a formal performance discussion with the vendor. As a result, the vendor brought in additional resources and we recovered two of the three missed milestones, keeping the program's benefits realisation on track."

6. How do you report program status and benefits realisation to a steering committee that includes executives who are short on time?

Why they ask

This client facing question tests your written and verbal communication, and your ability to respect senior stakeholders' time.

How to structure your answer

Use a communication focused structure: prepare a concise one page dashboard, lead with the headline, cover risks and decisions needed, and leave detail for an appendix.

Example answer

"I keep the main report to one page: a red amber green status for each project, the program level status, key risks and issues, and any decisions the committee needs to make. I lead with the headline: are we on track for the benefit, and if not, what is the plan? I use Tableau dashboards for visual detail and keep the full data pack in an appendix. If a project is off track, I bring a recommended mitigation rather than just the problem. This approach has helped me keep steering committee meetings to thirty minutes while still getting the sign offs needed to keep the program moving."