

# BECOMING A TECHNICAL PROGRAM MANAGER



**TPM University**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                               |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| About the author .....                                                        | 5         |
| About tpm university .....                                                    | 6         |
| <b>One What is a Technical Program Manager .....</b>                          | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>TWO Who Becomes a Technical Program Manager.....</b>                       | <b>9</b>  |
| The “Typical” Path: From Engineering.....                                     | 9         |
| The “PM-to-TPM” Path: From Project or Product Management .....                | 9         |
| The “Unconventional” Path: From Non-Technical Fields.....                     | 10        |
| The Common Denominator.....                                                   | 10        |
| <b>THREE What TPMs DO: Core Responsibilities.....</b>                         | <b>12</b> |
| The Big Picture .....                                                         | 12        |
| Key Responsibilities .....                                                    | 12        |
| <b>FOUR TPMs, Ems, &amp; pMs .....</b>                                        | <b>15</b> |
| The Product Manager (PM): The “What” and “Why” .....                          | 15        |
| The Engineering Manager (EM): The “How” and “Who” .....                       | 15        |
| The Technical Program Manager (TPM): The “When” and “How We Coordinate” ..... | 16        |
| How they Collaborate .....                                                    | 16        |
| <b>FIVE MUST HAVE HARD SKILLS .....</b>                                       | <b>18</b> |
| Core Technical Skills for TPMs .....                                          | 18        |
| The T-Shaped TPM.....                                                         | 19        |
| Bridging Business and Engineering .....                                       | 19        |
| <b>SIX MUST HAVE SOFT SKILLS .....</b>                                        | <b>21</b> |
| Why Soft Skills Matter So Much.....                                           | 21        |
| Core Soft Skills for TPMs.....                                                | 21        |
| The Soft Skills Multiplier .....                                              | 22        |
| <b>SEVEN The TPM Lifecycle: From Kick-off to Post-Mortem .....</b>            | <b>23</b> |
| 1. Initiation / Kickoff .....                                                 | 24        |
| 2. Planning .....                                                             | 24        |
| 3. Execution .....                                                            | 24        |
| 4. Launch / Delivery .....                                                    | 25        |

|                                               |           |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 5. Post-Mortem / Retrospective .....          | 25        |
| <b>EIGHT The TPM Career ROADMAP .....</b>     | <b>26</b> |
| Starting Out: Getting In.....                 | 26        |
| Growth Milestones: Mid-Level to Senior.....   | 26        |
| Advanced Path: Principal and Beyond .....     | 27        |
| Leadership track .....                        | 27        |
| <b>NINE Breaking IN.....</b>                  | <b>28</b> |
| Step 1: Crafting your Resume .....            | 28        |
| Step 2: Networking Like a TPM.....            | 28        |
| Step 3: Interview Prep for Aspiring TPMs..... | 29        |
| <b>TEN Resources &amp; Next Steps .....</b>   | <b>30</b> |
| Primary Resources.....                        | 30        |
| Books .....                                   | 30        |
| Communities .....                             | 30        |



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Now for a little bit about myself. My name is Doron Katz. I reside in Kirkland Washington. I have been a technical program manager for over ten years, and software engineer for another 12 years, working for startups as well as prominent corporations such as Walmart, Amazon, TCL, and the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. I have had the fortune of working across California, Washington, and Australia where I grew up.

I graduated with a bachelor of Internet Sciences from the University of Wollongong in 2000, and later on obtained a Master of Management and Computer Science degree from another Australian university, Charles Sturt.

I started out as a web developer in 2004, fascinated with interactive programming languages such as ActionScript/Flex. With the demise of the language thanks to Apple's refusal to support Flash, I decided to pivot to Objective-C as soon as the iPhone took the world by storm, in 2008. Splitting my time between various web technologies and iOS, I quickly made the transition in 2015 to Swift, a beautiful language that captivated me from the outset.

That same year, I took the conscious decision to move beyond being a developer and to become a manager. I felt that while I love being in the weeds of programming, I could be an even greater catalyst working more closely with product managers, directors, and customers. More so, I felt a gap in my workflow where planning sometimes was lacking, unpredictable, and opaque. Leveraging my technical skills, soft skills, and obsessive organizational skills, I could be an effective conduit, a nexus if you will, between these various related disciplines. And essentially that's where I ended up settling, with the big caveat that I still enjoy coding and get my hands dirty.

I think that's one of the most important attributes of an effective TPM, one that possess strong technical acumen while being able to see the strategic landscape, in order to build the most reliable intuition. We'll talk more about the role of TPMs in the first chapter, so I'll defer my rant until then.

## **ABOUT TPM UNIVERSITY**

In 2024, I decided to launch a company that advocates and evangelizes the discipline of Technical Program Management, with the aim of evangelizing the discipline far and wide through blog posts, books (such as this one), podcasts, videos, and training courses. Often Technical Program Management is misunderstood, under-leveraged, under-utilized in companies wide and small.

TPM University aims to provide free and paid content, insights from industry experts to increase awareness to the role and how TPMs can truly be *force-multipliers*.

# ONE

## WHAT IS A TECHNICAL PROGRAM MANAGER

In today's complex tech ecosystems, where cross-functional collaboration and rapid delivery are essential, a singular role has emerged to keep it all running smoothly, the **Technical Program Manager**, or TPM. Often described as the “glue” or “orchestrator” that holds product, engineering, and operations together, TPMs are increasingly recognized as strategic drivers of execution and innovation in technology companies. [ServiceNow](#) describes the role of Technical Program Manager as:

*Technical program management has evolved significantly in the few years since its inception. Initially focused on managing isolated technical projects, the role of TPM now encompasses a broad range of responsibilities closely aligned with organizational strategy. As technology has advanced and projects have become more complex, the need for a dedicated professional to oversee the integration of technical and business objectives in Agile environments has likewise grown. This has positioned TPMs as crucial players in the tech industry, driving initiatives that span multiple departments and require a deep understanding of both technical and managerial principles.*

At its core, a Technical Program Manager is responsible for leading cross-functional initiatives that require a deep understanding of both the technical architecture and the organizational landscape. Unlike traditional project managers who may focus primarily on timelines and task tracking, TPMs dive into the “how” and “why” of a program. They manage risks, dependencies, and delivery plans across diverse teams and technologies—often without having formal authority over any of them.

The demand for TPMs has surged in recent years, especially in industries undergoing digital transformation. According to data from [Levels.fyi](#) and Glassdoor, TPMs at major tech firms often command salaries ranging from \$130K to \$220K+, depending on seniority and scope of responsibility. More importantly, they occupy mission-critical positions that influence

everything from architecture reviews to go-to-market strategy. So why does this role matter now more than ever?

Because complexity is the new norm. Modern software systems are no longer monolithic; they're distributed, cloud-native, interconnected, and AI-driven. Stakeholders span multiple geographies, technologies change quickly, and business needs evolve constantly. TPMs thrive in this chaos—not by being the loudest in the room, but by bringing clarity, driving momentum, and ensuring that nothing important falls through the cracks.

## **TPMS TURN “WE SHOULD” INTO “WE SHIPPED.”**

TPMs sits at the intersection of strategy and execution. They speak the languages of engineers, product owners, and executives alike, and ensure that ambitious goals translate into achievable, measurable outcomes. While every TPM's role varies depending on the company and domain, the core responsibility remains the same: drive programs from concept to completion with technical insight, operational rigor, and stakeholder alignment. In the forthcoming sections, we'll explore the many facets of TPMs—from what skills you'll need, to how to break into the field, to how to grow and thrive as a program leader in the tech world.



# TWO WHO BECOMES A TECHNICAL PROGRAM MANAGER

There is no singular path to becoming a Technical Program Manager, and that's part of what makes the role so versatile and for many, attainable. My personal journey took me from being a software engineer through engineering management, even some product management and technical writing before settling on the TPM path. While some TPMs certainly do come from traditional technical or project-based roles, many arrive from more unconventional routes, bringing with them a rich tapestry of thought and experience that enhances how they lead.

## **THE "TYPICAL" PATH: FROM ENGINEERING**

The most common path into TPM is from a software engineering discipline. Former developers, QA engineers, systems architects, or DevOps specialists often shift into TPM roles. These candidates tend to have some foundational technical fluency to engage in architecture discussions and navigate complex systems, which makes them especially credible when working with engineering teams.

In fact, many companies such as Walmart, Google, and Amazon exclusively seek TPMs with strong technical foundations and even include system design or coding assessments in their interview processes. Former engineers who can "zoom out" and orchestrate programs are often fast-tracked into TPM roles with increasing scope.

## **THE "PM-TO-TPM" PATH: FROM PROJECT OR PRODUCT MANAGEMENT**

Another major pipeline comes from project or product management. Traditional project managers may already have experience driving timelines, coordinating teams, and working with stakeholders although may lack the technical expertise—learning about system architecture, development methodologies, and tools like CI/CD or cloud platforms.

Product managers sometimes pivot to TPM when they realize they enjoy the execution and coordination side more than product strategy or customer discovery. They may already be

comfortable working alongside engineers and leading initiatives, may also already be technical as is the case with companies such as Amazon, making the transition more about title and focus than function.

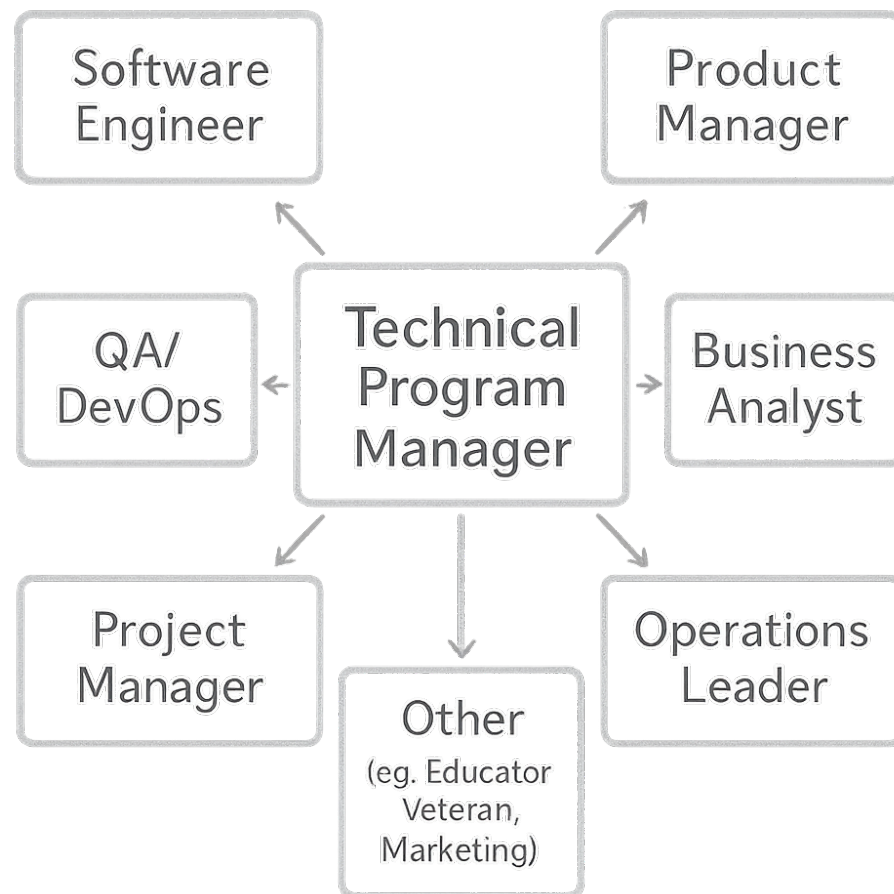
## **THE “UNCONVENTIONAL” PATH: FROM NON-TECHNICAL FIELDS**

Perhaps the most inspiring TPMs are those who come from completely unrelated fields—teachers, operations managers, even former marketers or military veterans—who successfully transition into tech. These individuals often bring invaluable and diverse soft skills in leadership, empathy, problem-solving under pressure, and adaptability. With a deliberate focus on building technical knowledge and project fundamentals, they break into the role by demonstrating that they can lead in ambiguity and learn fast.

**BOOTCAMPS, CERTIFICATIONS (LIKE PMP OR AWS), OPEN-SOURCE CONTRIBUTIONS, AND EVEN TECHNICAL SIDE PROJECTS CAN HELP BRIDGE THE KNOWLEDGE GAP FOR THOSE COMING FROM NON-TRADITIONAL BACKGROUNDS.**

## **THE COMMON DENOMINATOR**

So what unites successful TPMs, regardless of where they start? Their ability to connect dots, identify patterns, and drive outcomes. They have an innate curiosity, a desire to make things run more smoothly, and the resilience to handle messy, high-stakes programs. TPMs are often the “fixers” of the organization—not always the most technical, but almost always the most organized and resourceful.



# THREE

## WHAT TPMS DO: CORE RESPONSIBILITIES

If you were to ask ten different companies what a Technical Program Manager does, you may get ten slightly different answers. That's because the TPM role moulds into the environment of the company, its size, maturity, and industry. Whichever flavor of job description you read, TPMs are the orchestrators of delivery. They turn big ideas into well-executed programs and keep all the moving parts aligned.

### THE BIG PICTURE

At its essence, the TPM role is about ensuring that large, often complex technical programs are delivered on time, within scope, and with minimal risk. A TPM serves as the central node of coordination, aligning engineers, product managers, designers, stakeholders, and sometimes even legal or compliance teams (such as InfoSec) to move a program from kickoff to launch.

The uniqueness of TPMs is in their ability to operate both strategically and tactically. They're not just managing a schedule—they're unblocking teams, facilitating architecture discussions, identifying interdependencies, and ensuring stakeholders are informed and engaged throughout the lifecycle.

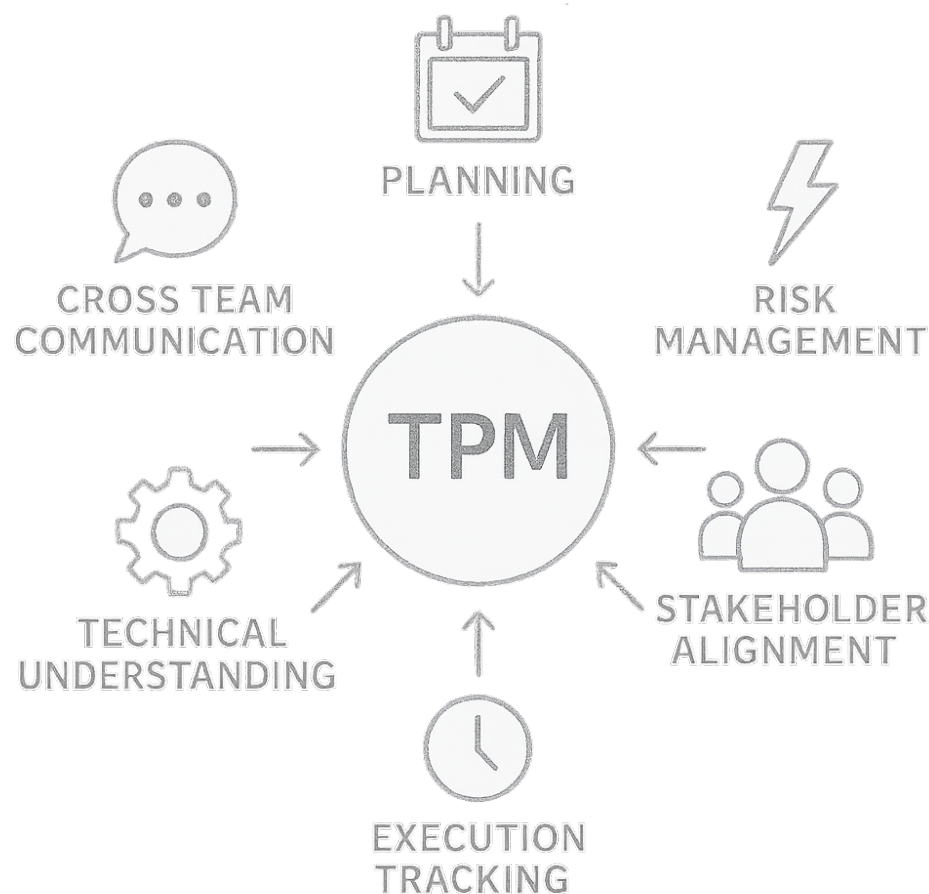
### KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

Mentioning that each TPM role varies by company and industry, the following are common responsibilities:

- **Program Planning & Roadmapping:** TPMs create detailed timelines, define milestones, and work with cross-functional partners to build delivery plans.
- **Dependency Management:** TPMs identify and resolve blockers, making sure inter-team dependencies don't stall progress.
- **Risk Identification & Mitigation:** TPMs proactively call out risks, technical, logistical, or organizational and develop mitigation strategies.
- **Communication & Status Reporting:** TPMs serve as the single source of truth for program updates. They provide clear, tailored communication to different audiences, from engineers to executives.

- **Technical Understanding:** TPMs can lead or support architecture reviews, understand trade-offs, and help teams evaluate technical debt, scalability, and design decisions.
- **Stakeholder Alignment:** TPMs bring teams together—especially when there are competing priorities or misaligned goals. They mediate, facilitate, and clarify.

Think of a TPM as a project's chief air traffic controller: monitoring flight paths, coordinating across towers, rerouting when weather changes, and ensuring safe landings across the board.

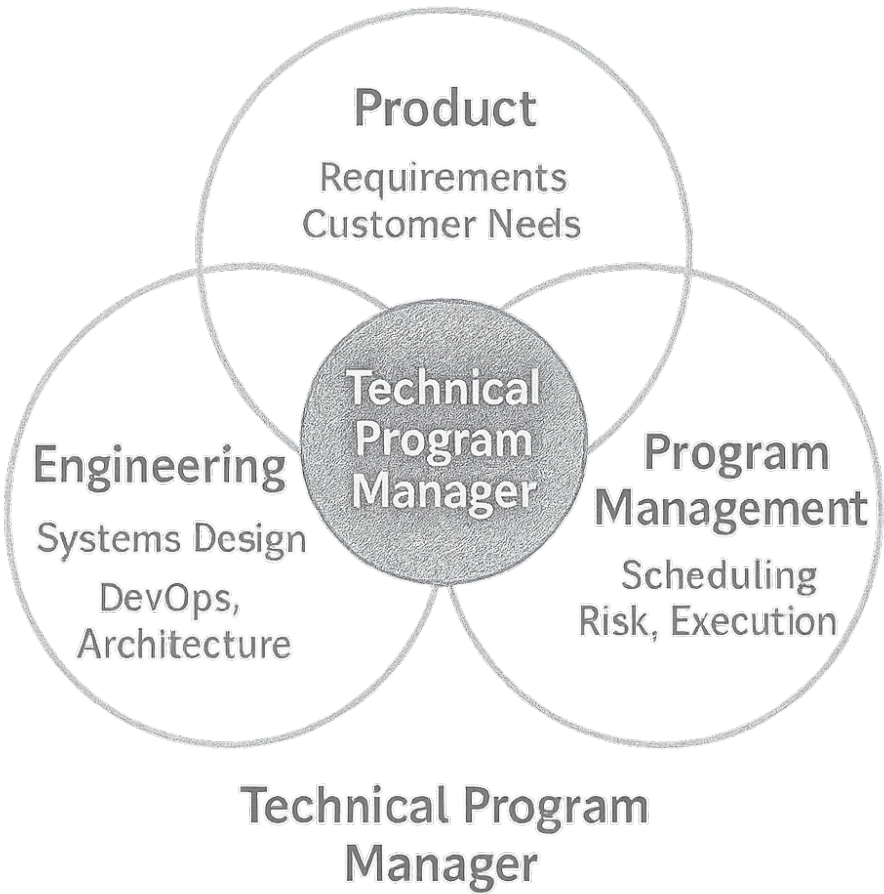


**GOOD TPMS KEEP THINGS MOVING.  
GREAT TPMS DO SO WHILE IMPROVING  
HOW THE WORK GETS DONE.  
AUTOMATION, PROCESS RE-  
ALIGNMENT, ALL OF THAT.**

By handling cross-functional coordination, TPMs free up engineers to focus on building. By centralizing updates and clearing ambiguity, they reduce noise for leadership. By proactively managing risks and planning for scale, they create more resilient systems and stronger teams.



A successful TPM not only delivers the thing—they build the engine that delivers things better, faster, and with greater quality over time.



# FOUR

## TPMS, EMS, & PMS

**K**nowing that each company defines a TPM slightly differently, one of the most common questions aspiring Technical Program Managers ask is:

**“HOW IS A TPM DIFFERENT FROM A  
PRODUCT MANAGER OR ENGINEERING  
MANAGER?”**

All three roles are deeply involved in technical projects and lead teams but underneath their common similarities lies a crucial distinction: the focus of each role.

### **THE PRODUCT MANAGER (PM): THE “WHAT” AND “WHY”**

Product Managers are responsible for defining the vision and strategy of a product. They live in the world of customer needs, business goals, and product-market fit. PMs work closely with customers, sales teams, designers, and leadership to prioritize features and shape the roadmap. Their focus is the “**what are we building, and why?**” and:

- Owns the product backlog
- Prioritizes features and defines requirements
- Acts as the voice of the customer
- Works with TPMs and Engineering Managers to ensure feasibility and delivery

At companies like Amazon, you would find many Product Managers with the title Technical Product Manager, or PMT for short. They have a more technical aptitude but their focus still remains the same.

### **THE ENGINEERING MANAGER (EM): THE “HOW” AND “WHO”**

Engineering Managers are responsible for building and nurturing the engineering team. Their world revolves around code quality, team health, and delivery capacity. EMs help shape technical decisions, hire and mentor developers, and ensure that engineering best practices are followed.

- Manages the engineers and owns technical execution
- Drives architectural decisions and engineering velocity

- Provides mentorship and performance feedback
- Collaborates with TPMs on execution plans and staffing

Engineering managers are the natural progression from senior engineers looking to move from individual contributors (IC) to managing teams.

## THE TECHNICAL PROGRAM MANAGER (TPM): THE “WHEN” AND “HOW WE COORDINATE”

Circling back to TPMs, they are responsible for orchestrating execution across teams, timelines, and stakeholders. They don’t (usually) manage engineers or define product features—instead, they focus on aligning people, processes, and progress. TPMs thrive in ambiguity and create structure where there is none.

- Owns program delivery across functions
- Manages schedules, dependencies, and risks
- Ensures everyone is aligned and moving toward shared goals
- Serves as the bridge between product, engineering, and business stakeholders

## HOW THEY COLLABORATE

Thinking of a product as a film:

1. The **PM** is the screenwriter and producer—they know the story that needs to be told.
2. The **EM** is the cinematographer and crew chief—they know how to get the best performance from the cast and equipment.
3. The **TPM** is the director—they keep the cast, camera crew, script, and studio aligned so the movie actually gets made on time and within budget.

| Responsibility                | PM (Product Manager) | EM (Engineering Manager) | TPM (Technical Program Manager) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Defines product vision        | ✔                    |                          |                                 |
| Manages engineers             |                      | ✔                        |                                 |
| Coordinates delivery plans    |                      | ✔ (within team)          | ✔ (across teams)                |
| Prioritizes features          | ✔                    |                          |                                 |
| Leads architecture reviews    |                      | ✔                        | 🟡 (participates)                |
| Drives execution timelines    | 🟡 (collaborates)     | 🟡 (collaborates)         | ✔                               |
| Communicates to stakeholders  | ✔                    | 🟡                        | ✔                               |
| Manages risk and dependencies |                      | 🟡                        | ✔                               |

🟡 = Supports or collaborates

In high-performing organizations, PMs, EMs, and TPMs operate as a triad, each owning distinct dimensions but working together toward shared outcomes.

# FIVE MUST HAVE HARD SKILLS

One of the defining features of a Technical Program Manager is their ability to operate at the intersection of technical complexity and execution. While TPMs may not be shipping production code daily, their effectiveness hinges on a solid foundation in technical systems knowledge and fluency in the software development process.

This doesn't mean you need to be a senior software engineer, but you should understand how software works, how systems scale, and how to identify and resolve architectural tradeoffs. TPMs are often embedded in engineering teams or partner closely with them, which requires enough technical depth to follow (and contribute to) conversations about APIs, infrastructure, system design, and dependencies. So what are the core skills of a TPM?

## CORE TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR TPMS

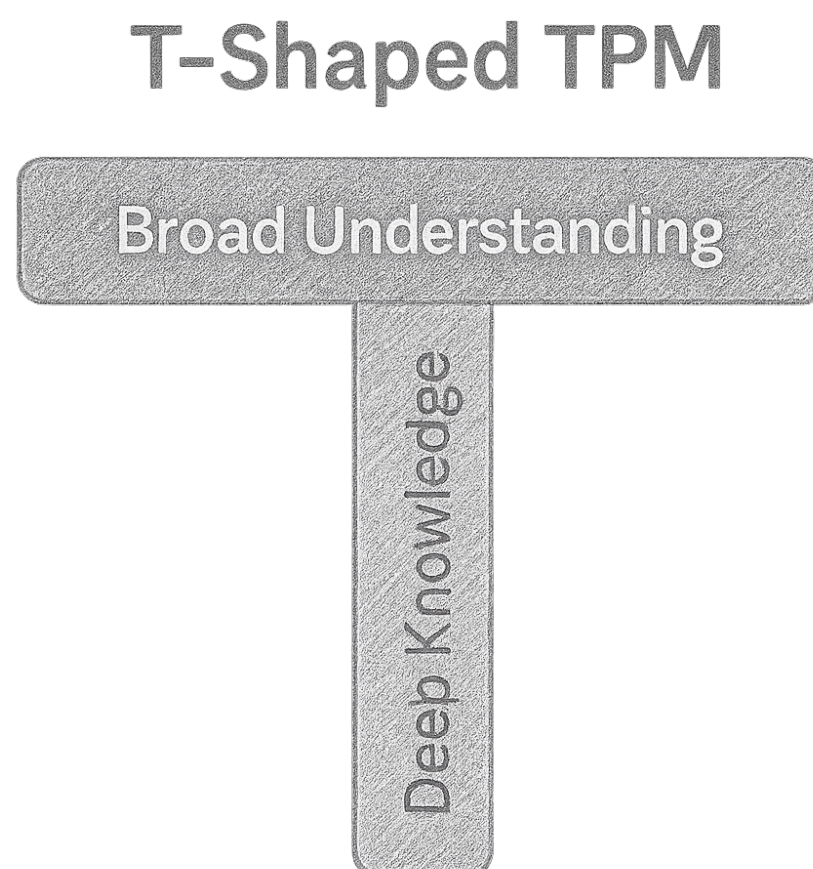
You should aim to develop or hone in on the following hard skills:

- **Systems Design Fundamentals:** You should understand how components fit together, from databases, services, APIs, to frontends. Knowing when to use a queueing system or how micro-services communicate helps you assess risk, timelines, and effort accurately. You should be familiar with the latest and most common vendor products that operate across these layers.
- **SDLC (Software Development Lifecycle):** TPMs should be experts in the stages of software delivery, from planning to design, development, QA, release, and post-production support. Understanding Agile, Scrum, and DevOps practices is table stakes even though you won't necessarily operate as a scrum master yourself.
- **Cloud and DevOps Literacy:** Most modern systems are deployed in cloud environments (AWS, GCP, Azure). You don't need to architect the solution, but you should know the difference between containers, server-less, and virtual machines, and how CI/CD pipelines affect deployment velocity.

- **Security, Privacy, and Scalability Concepts:** TPMs often charter across legal, security, and compliance teams. Familiarity with principles like encryption, authentication, data classification, and fault tolerance gives you a seat at the table in technical planning.
- **Technical Tooling Awareness:** Know the tools your engineers use, such as Git, JIRA, Jenkins, Terraform, Grafana, and more. You don't have to configure them, but you should understand what they're used for and how they impact delivery workflows.
- **Reading and Navigating Code:** You don't have to write elegant algorithms, but being able to read code, review pull requests, or understand stack traces can dramatically improve your 'street cred' and speed when troubleshooting blockers.

## THE T-SHAPED TPM

A helpful mental model is the “T-shaped” TPM. The vertical part of the “T” represents deep knowledge in one or two domains (e.g., backend systems, machine learning, mobile), while the horizontal bar indicates broad understanding across many technologies. This mixture is what enables TPMs to understand the big picture while engaging meaningfully with engineers on the details.





Perhaps the TPM's most critically, your technical skills is in their ability to translate business objectives into actionable engineering plans. When a product manager says, "We need real-time sync," it's your job to clarify what "real-time" means, assess feasibility with engineering, and structure the delivery plan. This role as translator is impossible without fluency in both domains.

**TPMS OFTEN SHINE WHEN THEY HELP  
SIMPLIFY COMPLEX TOPICS FOR  
STAKEHOLDERS OR PROVIDE INSIGHT THAT  
PRODUCT OR BUSINESS TEAMS MIGHT  
NOT HAVE THOUGHT TO ASK. TECHNICAL  
DEPTH EMPOWERS YOU TO ASK BETTER  
QUESTIONS—AND SPOT RISK SOONER.**

# SIX MUST HAVE SOFT SKILLS

If hard skills get your foot in the door as a Technical Program Manager, soft skills are what *keeps you* in the room, and often what determine your success. While your technical fluency builds credibility, it's your ability to lead, influence, and communicate that determines your real impact. The best TPMs are not only orchestrators of programs but also *catalysts of collaboration*.

## WHY SOFT SKILLS MATTER SO MUCH

Unlike Engineering Managers, TPMs rarely have direct authority over the teams they work with. You won't be conducting performance reviews, assigning tasks, or giving raises. Instead, you'll lead programs involving cross-functional teams who don't report to you—and may have competing priorities.

This is where *influencing without authority* becomes the TPM's superpower. Your role is to bring clarity, create alignment, and keep momentum across teams. That requires emotional intelligence, persuasion, and the ability to lead through relationships rather than rank.

## CORE SOFT SKILLS FOR TPMS

You should aim to develop or hone in on the following hard skills:

**Communication:** TPMs are the connective tissue of the program. You need to tailor your message to your audience—presenting risks clearly to leadership, giving crisp updates to stakeholders, and translating technical decisions for non-technical teams. You're also a mediator, often resolving miscommunications before they escalate.

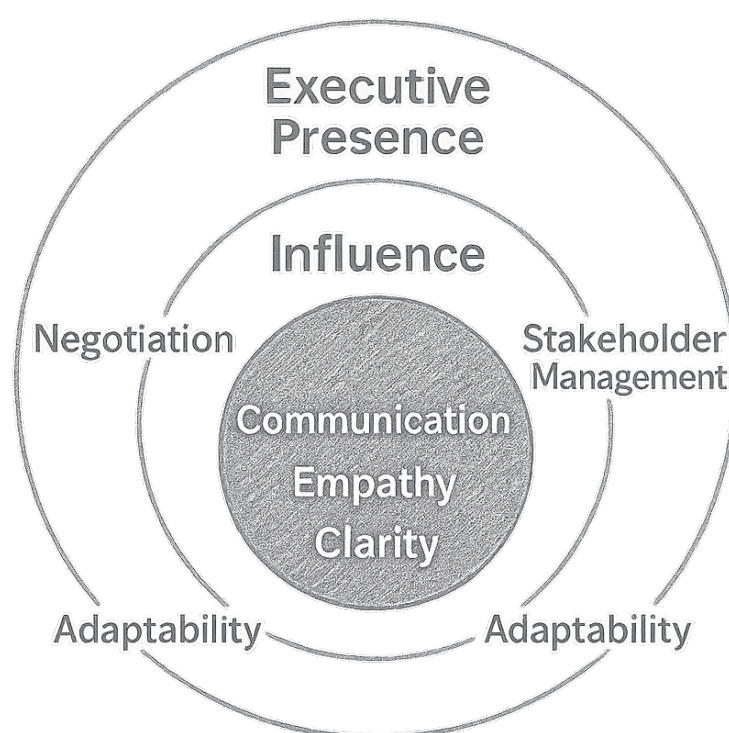
- **Influence & Negotiation:** TPMs routinely drive decisions across engineering, product, design, and operations. You'll need to earn trust, propose data-backed plans, and garner consensus even when opinions diverge. Influence isn't manipulation—it's structured persuasion rooted in clarity and credibility.

- **Leadership Without Authority:** This is the art of leading people when you don't manage them. That means facilitating alignment, motivating teams around shared goals, and holding contributors accountable by creating a culture of transparency and ownership.
- **Conflict Resolution:** With cross-team dependencies, misalignment is inevitable. The TPM's job is to get ahead of conflict, or manage it gracefully when it arises. Empathy, objectivity, and a solutions-first mindset go a long way.
- **Adaptability & Resilience:** Projects pivot. Roadmaps change. People leave. TPMs need to stay calm in chaos and shift gears without derailing delivery. A flexible but grounded mindset is essential in dynamic tech environments.
- **Organization & Prioritization:** TPMs often juggle multiple projects, stakeholders, and timelines. Your ability to triage effectively, manage risk, and maintain clarity under pressure will earn you trust across the org.

## THE SOFT SKILLS MULTIPLIER

The truth is, your soft skills amplify your technical ones. A TPM with strong systems knowledge but poor communication may struggle to rally teams. But a TPM with solid technical fundamentals and exceptional soft skills becomes the go-to leader in every room. You're not just managing delivery but you're enabling teams to succeed, and that starts with how you show up.

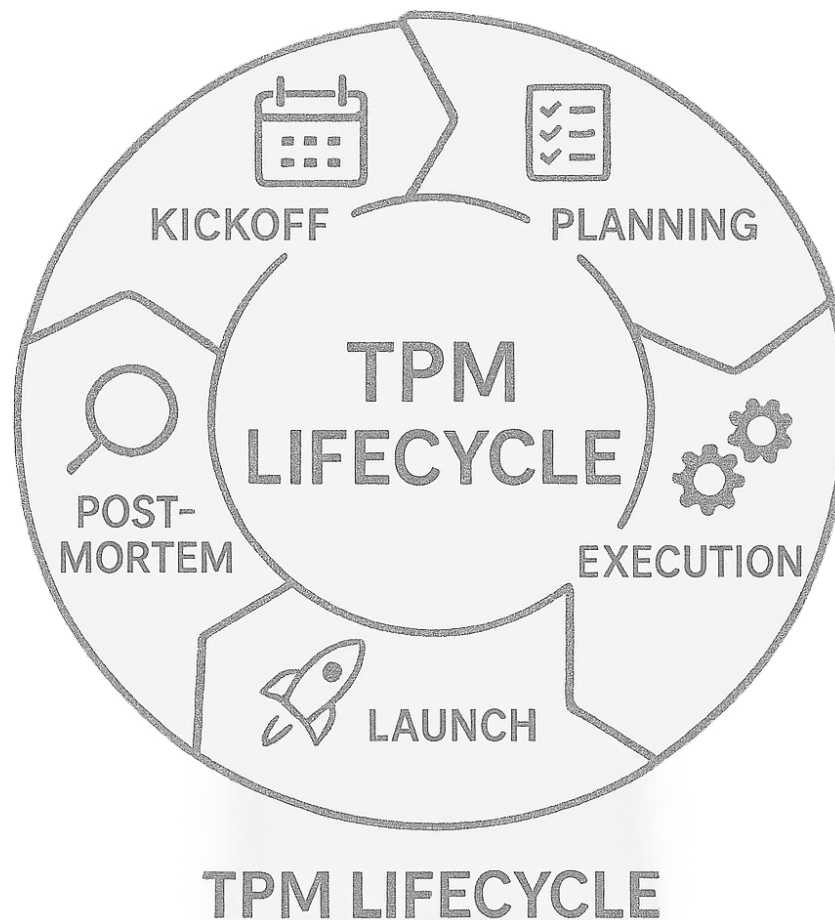
### TPM Influence Toolkit



# SEVEN

## THE TPM LIFECYCLE: FROM KICK-OFF TO POST-MORTEM

A great Technical Program Manager doesn't just parachute in mid-project to put out fires, they architect the journey from day one to well after delivery. Understanding and mastering the program lifecycle is at the heart of TPM excellence. Engineers have their Software Development Lifecycle, you have yours. Unlike project managers who may focus narrowly on execution, TPMs are embedded across the entire lifecycle, from shaping scope with stakeholders to leading retrospectives with engineering. Let's walk through a typical end-to-end TPM lifecycle, highlighting the unique role TPMs play at each stage.



## 1. INITIATION / KICKOFF

The lifecycle commences with discovery: understanding the “why” behind the initiative. TPMs work closely with product managers, business leads, and architects to define the problem, clarify scope, align on success criteria, and surface early risks.

Key TPM contributions:

- Organize and facilitate kickoff meetings
- Create the first draft of program charters or PRDs
- Align stakeholders on roles, expectations, and deliverables

**GREAT TPMS ASK GREAT QUESTIONS DURING KICKOFF (“WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?”, “WHO’S ACCOUNTABLE FOR X?”, “WHAT DEPENDENCIES DO WE FORESEE?”) OFTEN PREVENT COSTLY AMBIGUITY LATER.**

## 2. PLANNING

With the goals defined, the TPM then translates the vision into execution. This is the TPM architecture stage (not the engineering architecture stage). You build the delivery plan, accounting for technical complexity, dependencies, capacity, and risk.

Key TPM contributions:

- Decompose programs into phases, milestones, and trackable workstreams
- Collaborate with engineering to map timelines and resources
- Define metrics, dashboards, and communication cadences
- Identify cross-team dependencies and escalation paths

Deliverables can include RACI matrix, program tracker, risk log, stakeholder map, architecture review schedule.

## 3. EXECUTION

Here, TPMs get into the spotlight, as the catalysts. You’re monitoring progress, facilitating syncs, and solving problems before they escalate. You track burn-downs, unblock teams, and ensure that deliverables flow according to plan.

Key TPM contributions:

- Run steering committee reviews. You may also run stand ups but not for an engineering team but across multiple dependent teams.
- Proactively identify slippage or blockers

- Provide crisp, no-drama status reports to stakeholders
- Facilitate design or trade-off decisions (when scope, time, or resources clash)

**TPMS ARE NOT TRAFFIC COPS—THEY'RE NAVIGATORS. YOUR ROLE IS TO STEER THE PROGRAM, NOT JUST OBSERVE IT.**

#### **4. LAUNCH / DELIVERY**

In here lies the moment of truth. Whether it's a system migration, a new feature, or a data platform rollout, the TPM ensures readiness across engineering, QA, operations, and support.

Key TPM contributions:

- Coordinate go/no-go checklists
- Ensure test coverage and monitoring plans are in place
- Facilitate deployment logistics and release communications
- Prepare rollback or mitigation plans

Build a “launch war room” mentality—TPMs often serve as air traffic control during releases.

#### **5. POST-MORTEM / RETROSPECTIVE**

A program isn't done until you learn from it. Great TPMs lead thoughtful, blameless retrospectives that identify what worked, what didn't, and what should be improved for next time. And this isn't just with your engineering team and product manager, but with all of your stakeholders.

Key TPM contributions:

- Facilitate structured postmortems with clear takeaways
- Capture lessons learned and action items
- Close the feedback loop to leadership and partner teams



# EIGHT

## THE TPM CAREER ROADMAP

A career in Technical Program Management is more than just a job change—it’s a leadership journey. Whether you’re coming from engineering, operations, product, or project management, TPM offers a long and rewarding growth trajectory. But unlike standardized engineering ladders, the TPM path can vary significantly between companies.

### STARTING OUT: GETTING IN

Most TPMs don’t start their careers with the “TPM” title. In fact, many fall into the role by doing TPM work before earning the title. Entry into TPM typically comes from:

- Software Engineers who naturally take on planning, coordination, or stakeholder work
- Project Managers who build technical depth and earn trust with engineering teams
- Product Managers who shift toward delivery-heavy initiatives
- Operations/Support folks who become “glue people” and grow into delivery leads

At the entry level (often titled TPM I or Associate TPM depending on the company), the scope tends to focus on small- to mid-sized projects within a single team or function. The emphasis is on learning the tools, building relationships, and delivering predictably.

### GROWTH MILESTONES: MID-LEVEL TO SENIOR

As TPMs gain experience, they move into broader, more autonomous roles. Titles here typically include TPM II, Senior TPM, or Staff TPM. The difference isn’t just seniority but scope. As you level up, you can expect the following changes:

- You lead cross-functional or cross-org programs
- You manage multiple workstreams and long-range dependencies
- You operate with minimal oversight
- You advise leadership and influence prioritization
- You mentor newer TPMs or cross-functional peers

By the Senior TPM stage, you’re expected to connect delivery to strategy. You’re not just tracking timelines, you’re shaping them.

## ADVANCED PATH: PRINCIPAL AND BEYOND

For TPMs who want to stay on the individual contributor (IC) path, many orgs offer roles like Principal TPM to drive large-scale, high-risk programs across orgs, or Senior Principal / Distinguished TPM to influences org-wide program strategy, process design, and long-range planning. These TPMs are often considered “force multipliers.” They mentor other TPMs, define best practices, and are embedded in executive planning cycles.

## LEADERSHIP TRACK

Some TPMs transition into management roles such as:

- **TPM Manager/Lead TPM:** Manages a small team of TPMs while still contributing hands-on
- **Director/Head of TPM:** Oversees TPM strategy for an entire business unit
- **VP of Program Management/Operations:** A rare but growing role, often in large orgs where delivery strategy is critical

People leadership shifts the focus from executing programs to building the team that does. It’s about coaching, career development, resourcing, and cross-org influence.

| Level Title            | Typical Scope                                | Focus                           |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Associate TPM          | Single project, local team                   | Learn the role, tools, basics   |
| TPM I / II             | Multi-sprint projects, within one org        | Coordination, risk, reporting   |
| Senior TPM             | Cross-team / cross-org programs              | Leadership, autonomy, influence |
| Staff / Principal TPM  | Strategic programs, high risk/visibility     | Systems thinking, org influence |
| Director / Head of TPM | Multiple programs & TPMs, org-level strategy | People & portfolio leadership   |

# NINE

## BREAKING IN

**W**hether you're pivoting from software engineering, project management, or a completely unrelated role, breaking into Technical Program Management can feel daunting but it's absolutely achievable. The key is to demonstrate that golden blend of technical fluency, delivery acumen, and cross-functional leadership. In this section, we'll break down how to package your experience, build your network, and ace the interview.

### STEP 1: CRAFTING YOUR RESUME

Your resume is your first opportunity to prove you fit the bill, and can prove it. It should reflect two core TPM pillars:

- I. **Technical Literacy:** systems you've worked on, tools you've used, and familiarity with architectures, SDLC, or DevOps processes.
- II. **Program Ownership:** initiatives you've led, risks you've managed, and outcomes you've delivered.

Recommended checklist for a strong TPM resume:

- Clear summary statement with keywords like “cross-functional delivery,” “technical execution,” and “stakeholder management”.
- Highlight major programs with **quantifiable** outcomes (e.g. “Led migration of legacy data pipeline, reducing latency by 40%”)
- Mention technical tools and domains you're familiar with (e.g., AWS, microservices, CI/CD)
- Use action verbs: led, coordinated, architected, delivered, streamlined

**CUSTOMIZE FOR EACH JOB—MANY COMPANIES USE ATS (APPLICANT TRACKING SYSTEMS), SO INCLUDE THE KEYWORDS FROM THE JOB DESCRIPTION.**

### STEP 2: NETWORKING LIKE A TPM

Most TPM jobs aren't landed by cold applications but they're earned through warm introductions believe it or not. Use your natural TPM (soft) skill set here: outreach, follow-ups, and relationship-building.

Ways to connect:

- Join TPM-focused LinkedIn groups, Discord servers, or Slack communities
- Attend virtual panels or local tech meetups
- Reach out to TPMs at target companies for a 15-minute informational chat (don't ask for a job, ask about their path, challenges, and team culture)

An example opener could be: *"Hi [Name], I'm transitioning into TPM from [your background] and admired your post on [topic]. Would love to hear about your journey—especially how you got started."*

End with a soft follow-up (e.g., engage with their content after the call). Relationships compound over time.

### **STEP 3: INTERVIEW PREP FOR ASPIRING TPMS**

TPM interviews typically test three areas:

- Technical Acumen:** system design basics, understanding of engineering principles, and the ability to dive into trade-offs.
- Program Execution:** how you manage dependencies, handle scope changes, plan sprints, and run large programs.
- Leadership & Communication:** behavioral questions about influencing without authority, resolving conflicts, or communicating upwards.

What to practice:

- System design questions (e.g., "Design a feature flag system")
- Behavioral STAR format responses (Situation, Task, Action, Result)
- Project breakdowns (e.g., "Walk me through a time you led a complex delivery")

Study materials:

- "Decode and Conquer" by Lewis Lin (for PM/TPM questions)
- System design YouTube channels like Gaurav Sen or Tech Dummies
- TPM interview guides on Glassdoor and Levels.fyi

Certifications (optional):

- PMP, CSM, or SAFe for candidates coming from non-tech roles
- AWS Cloud Practitioner or similar to show tech literacy
- GenAI courses

# TEN RESOURCES & NEXT STEPS

**C**ongratulations on completing the book! Your journey towards becoming a Technical Program Manager is commendable. The suggested resources will undoubtedly be valuable assets in your professional development. Transitioning into a Technical Program Manager role can feel like navigating an unfamiliar map. But the truth is, you're not alone—and you don't have to figure it all out yourself. Thousands of professionals have made the leap from engineering, project management, QA, support, operations, even education and they've left breadcrumbs behind.

## PRIMARY RESOURCES

We suggest you follow [TPMUniversity.com](https://TPMUniversity.com) as well as subscribe to our free newsletter. TPM University is building a repository of video courses, articles, insights from various industry leaders and more! Even a podcast is in the works. Follow TPMU on LinkedIn as well by searching for **TPM University**.

## BOOKS

- Technical Program Manager's Handbook: Unlock your TPM potential by leading technical projects successfully and elevating your career path by Joshua Teter.
- Evangelizing the TPM Craft: Principles and Practices of Technical Program Management in Silicon Valley by Zhanat Abylkassym.
- Measure What Matters by John Doerr.
- Cracking the PM Interview by Gayle Laakmann McDowell and Jackie Bavaro.

## COMMUNITIES

- LinkedIn group [TPMUniversity.com](https://TPMUniversity.com)
- LinkedIn group TPM Events
- Reddit: r/TPM and r/ProjectManagement