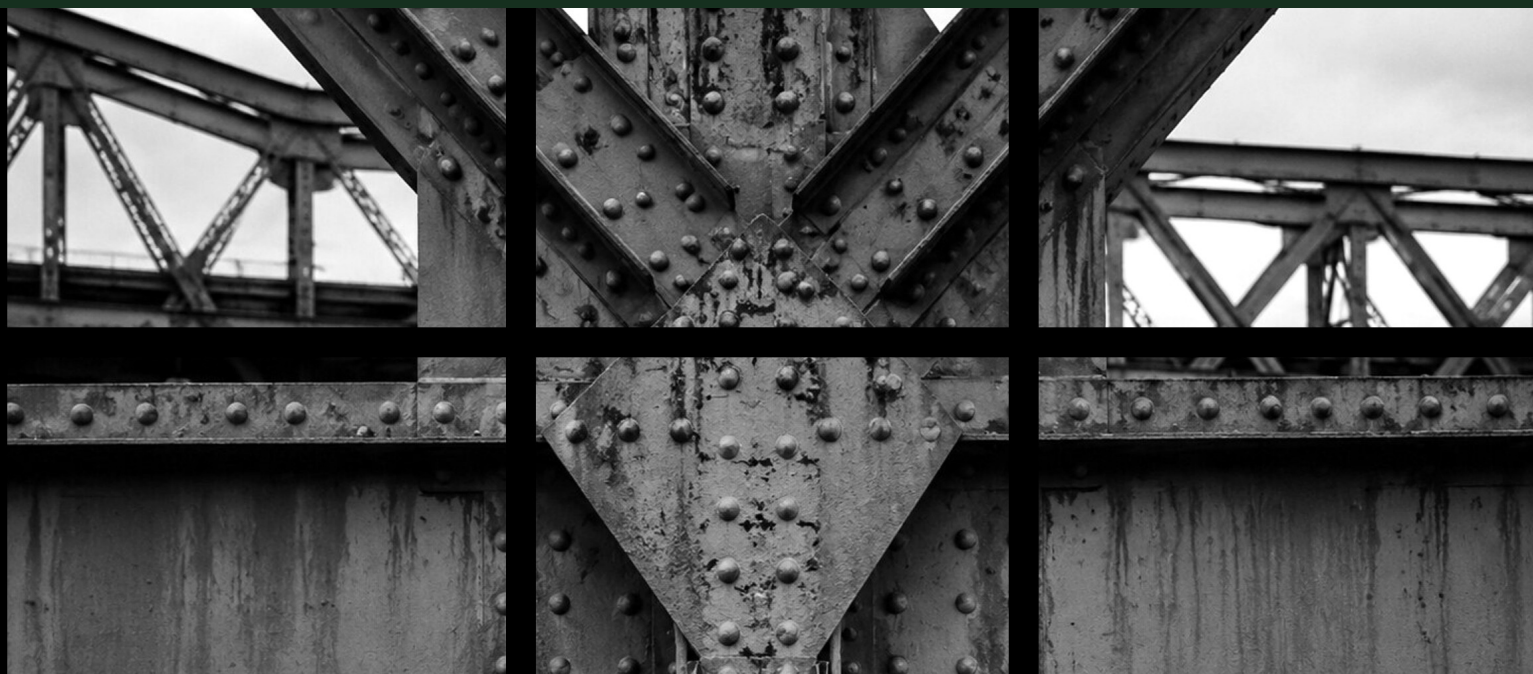


BEYOND STATUS REPORTS

A PMO That Only Reports Is Recording Failure, Not Governing Delivery

Why the new programme office must organise decisions without taking ownership away from leaders



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1. Beyond Status Reports

The programme office has produced its best pack yet.

Sixty-three pages cover nine projects, 26 performance measures, 41 risks and 17 issues. Dates have been reconciled. Financial figures agree with the ledger. Every workstream has supplied commentary. The summary shows four projects green, four amber and one red.

The steering committee spends 70 minutes reviewing it.

It makes no material decision.

Three weeks later, the red project misses a contractual milestone. The underlying problem was visible in the pack: a design approval had remained open for 24 days, two teams were working to different assumptions and a supplier had reserved the right to charge for delay. Yet the information was distributed across the decision log, milestone report and commercial appendix. The programme office reported every fact and connected none of them.

This is the identity crisis at the heart of the modern PMO. Organisations are establishing programme offices to bring order to increasingly complex change. They are hiring planners, analysts, risk specialists and administrators. But many offices have become highly disciplined reporting functions when the organisation actually needs a decision engine.

The distinction is not whether the PMO makes decisions. It should not take accountability from sponsors, business owners or steering committees. The distinction is whether its work improves the timing, evidence and follow-through of the decisions those leaders must make.

2. Reporting Became the Safe Mandate

The reporting PMO is attractive because its mandate appears objective. It can define templates, collect status, maintain plans, consolidate budgets and enforce a timetable without challenging who holds power.

Its outputs are visible and easy to measure:

- packs issued on time;
- milestones updated;
- risks recorded;

- actions assigned;
- financial figures reconciled;
- reporting compliance achieved.

These activities are necessary. Large programmes cannot be governed through informal conversations and separate workstream accounts. Common information creates the possibility of control.

But the possibility is not the result.

Once the PMO is judged by reporting completeness, it learns to optimise for the pack. Analysts spend their time chasing updates, correcting formats and negotiating status colours. Workstream leaders learn how to provide acceptable commentary. Steering meetings become reviews of prepared positions rather than forums in which uncertainty is exposed and choices are made.

The PMO can then become successful on its own terms while the programme fails around it.

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3. Information Is Not Yet a Decision

A decision requires more than an accurate description of the situation. It needs a choice, an owner, evidence, consequences and a time by which delay becomes a decision in itself.

The traditional pack rarely assembles those elements in one place. A typical amber milestone may be supported by several facts:

- design approval is overdue;
- testing cannot begin until approval;
- supplier resources are committed elsewhere after a fixed date;
- contingency can absorb ten working days;
- two business units disagree about the required process;
- the sponsor has authority to choose between the alternatives.

Reporting lists these facts. Decision support connects them:

If approval is not secured by Friday, testing loses its reserved supplier team. The programme must either accept a four-week delay, pay £180,000 to retain the team, or approve the standard process for both business units. The sponsor must decide by Thursday.

Nothing in that statement requires the PMO to own the choice. It requires the PMO to reveal the decision architecture: what must be decided, by whom, by when, from which options and with what consequence.

That is a different craft from status consolidation.

4. The Strongest Case for a Neutral Office

There is a serious objection to this broader role. Programme decisions belong with accountable executives. A PMO that frames options, challenges evidence and presses for decisions may become a shadow management team. It may centralise power in analysts who understand the reporting machinery but do not carry responsibility for business outcomes. The office could substitute procedural authority for leadership.

This danger is real. Some PMOs already mistake ownership of the process for ownership of the programme. They reject sensible deviations because a template is incomplete, or escalate matters without understanding the operating context. Expanding that behaviour would make delivery slower and accountability less clear.

The answer is not to keep the PMO neutral by keeping it passive. It is to define the boundary precisely.

The PMO should own:

- completeness and consistency of decision evidence;
- visibility of dependencies and consequences;
- clarity of decision rights;
- timing and escalation of unresolved choices;
- recording and follow-through of decisions.

It should not own:

- selection of the business outcome;
- acceptance of material risk;
- approval of funding or scope;
- resolution of legitimate business trade-offs;
- accountability for benefits.

The PMO organises the decision. The authorised leader makes it.

5. Build the Office Around the Decision Queue

The practical shift begins by treating decisions as a controlled flow, not as incidental items scattered through reports.

In one composite programme, the PMO maintains 118 open actions but only nine explicit decisions. A review of the actions reveals that 31 are actually fragments of unresolved choices: obtain further estimates, confirm business preference, assess supplier impact, revise the plan. Because each fragment has a separate owner, no one owns the decision they collectively support.

The PMO replaces this with a decision queue. Each material choice records:

- Decision: the precise question requiring authority.
- Owner: the role with authority and accountability to decide.
- Deadline: the date after which delay changes cost, schedule or risk.
- Options: credible alternatives, including the consequence of doing nothing.
- Evidence: facts, assumptions and uncertainties relevant to the choice.
- Dependencies: work that can proceed, pause or become exposed.
- Outcome: the decision, conditions and accepted consequences.

Within four weeks, the queue contains 27 decisions. Seven are already overdue. Three account for most of the schedule exposure previously described across 14 amber milestones.

This does not reduce the complexity of the programme. It makes the concentration of complexity visible.

The steering pack changes accordingly. It opens with decisions required, followed by exceptions to prior decisions, then the evidence supporting them. General status remains, but it no longer consumes the meeting before the work of governance begins.

6. Decisions Need a Different Rhythm

Monthly steering meetings are too slow for many programme choices and too frequent for others. A decision engine distinguishes between:

- delegated decisions made within workstreams under explicit limits;
- programme decisions made by the programme director or sponsor;
- enterprise decisions requiring broader executive authority;
- gate decisions authorising commitment to the next stage.

Each class needs a route and a maximum waiting time. A supplier clarification worth £20,000 should not wait three weeks for the steering committee. A change that weakens a financial control should not be approved informally because the next meeting is inconvenient.

The PMO monitors that flow. It does not merely count overdue decisions; it identifies why they are stuck:

- authority is unclear;
- evidence is incomplete;
- options have not been developed;
- affected functions have not been consulted;
- the accountable leader is avoiding the trade-off.

Each cause requires a different intervention. More reporting solves none of them.

7. From Minutes to Commitments

The final responsibility of a decision-oriented PMO is to preserve the integrity of what was decided.

Steering committees often approve a recommendation with qualifications that disappear during delivery. Minutes record that a project may proceed “subject to satisfactory testing” or “within the approved envelope”, but no one translates the condition into a test, owner and consequence.

The PMO should convert every conditional decision into a commitment:

- what must be true;
- who will provide the evidence;
- when it will be reviewed;

- who can confirm the condition is satisfied;
- what happens if it is not.

This closes the loop between governance and execution. Without it, the programme can comply with the words of a decision while evading its intent.

8. The Office the Programme Actually Needs

The rise of the PMO is a rational response to complexity. Programmes need common plans, reliable figures, disciplined risk management and a coherent record. But these are foundations, not the purpose of the office.

A reporting PMO tells leaders what has happened. A decision-oriented PMO shows what must be chosen before the next consequence becomes unavoidable. It assembles evidence, exposes dependency, clarifies authority and makes delay visible.

That role carries power and must be bounded. The PMO must never confuse framing a decision with owning it. Its authority comes from the quality of the process, not from substituting itself for accountable leadership.

The test is therefore not whether the pack is complete. It is whether the right person made the right decision while alternatives still existed – and whether the programme then did what was authorised.

If the PMO cannot improve that sequence, it is not yet a decision engine. It is a record-keeping office with a programme attached.