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A Steering Committee That Reports Is Not Steering

Why programme governance fails when senior forums receive information but avoid choices

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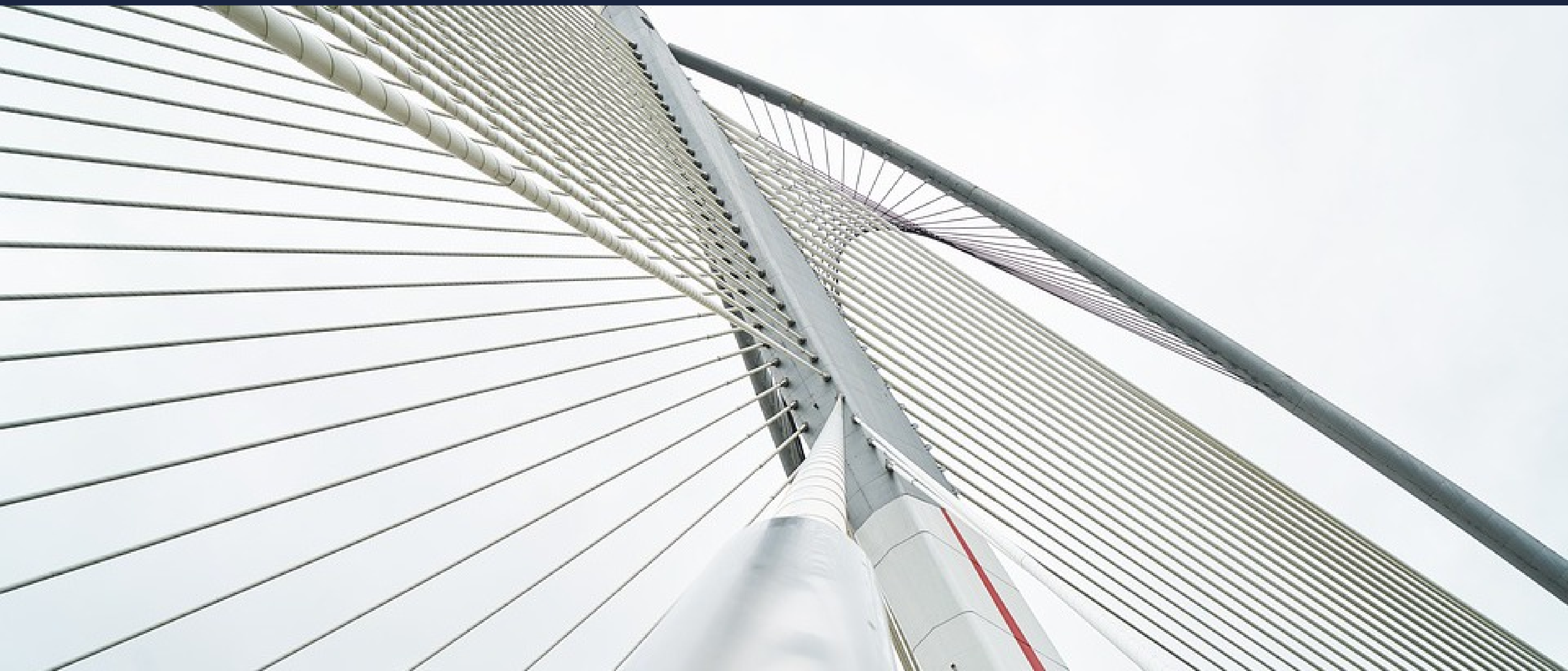

A Steering Committee That Reports Is Not Steering

> *"A steering committee earns its name only when a programme can point to decisions it could not have taken alone."*

The committee reviewed the programme. It did not steer it.

By 2007, most large change programmes have learned the ritual. Every month, a steering committee receives the pack: milestones, expenditure, risks, decisions sought and a reassuring collection of traffic lights. The meeting begins late because the senior people have come from other meetings. It ends on time because they have more to attend.

Everyone leaves believing that governance has occurred.

Often it has not.

The difference is not semantic. A steering committee exists to make decisions that the programme cannot make for itself: to settle a conflict between priorities, release a constraint, accept a risk, or change the terms on which the work will be judged. A committee that only receives information is a reporting audience. It may be well informed, but it is not steering.

The pattern is familiar. A programme director brings a decision on a regional system rollout. The commercial team wants the first release to include a local pricing exception. The technology team says it will add six weeks and expose the core design to a second round of testing. The pack lists the issue as amber, records both views and asks the committee to "note the proposed approach".

That phrasing decides the meeting before it begins. No one is asked to choose between speed, local flexibility and technical stability. The issue is noted, deferred and returned to the programme with the same unresolved tension. The next pack reports a slippage caused by a decision that no one was formally asked to take.

This is not usually the fault of weak chairs. It is more often a design failure. The committee has been given too much information and too little choice. Its agenda follows the structure of the status report rather than the structure of the decisions required.

The obvious objection is that senior sponsors cannot be expected to decide every operational detail. Quite right. A committee that reaches into day-to-day delivery quickly becomes a bottleneck. But this is an argument for clear thresholds, not for a passive forum. The programme should decide within its delegated authority; the committee should decide where the authority ends.

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Three changes make a disproportionate difference.

First, separate information from decision. A short pre-read can carry the status narrative. The meeting should reserve time for a small number of explicit choices, each stated in a form that permits a decision: the options, the recommendation, the consequence of delay and the accountable owner.

Second, make the decision log more important than the risk log. Risks describe what may happen. Decisions show what leadership has chosen to do about it. A programme with a long risk register and an empty decision log is usually telling you something important about its governance.

Third, close the loop in the next meeting. A decision is not complete when it is minuted; it is complete when the organisation can show what changed because of it. If the agreed pricing exception was rejected, did the local team change its plan? If funding was released, did the critical path move? This discipline exposes decorative decisions as quickly as decorative reporting.

The steering committee that steered nothing is rarely a dramatic failure. It is more dangerous than that. It creates the appearance of sponsorship while leaving difficult choices to accumulate below the surface. By the time the programme becomes visibly red, the decisions that would have kept it green are usually no longer available.

Governance is not the monthly act of being briefed. It is the visible exercise of judgement when the programme reaches a choice it cannot resolve alone.