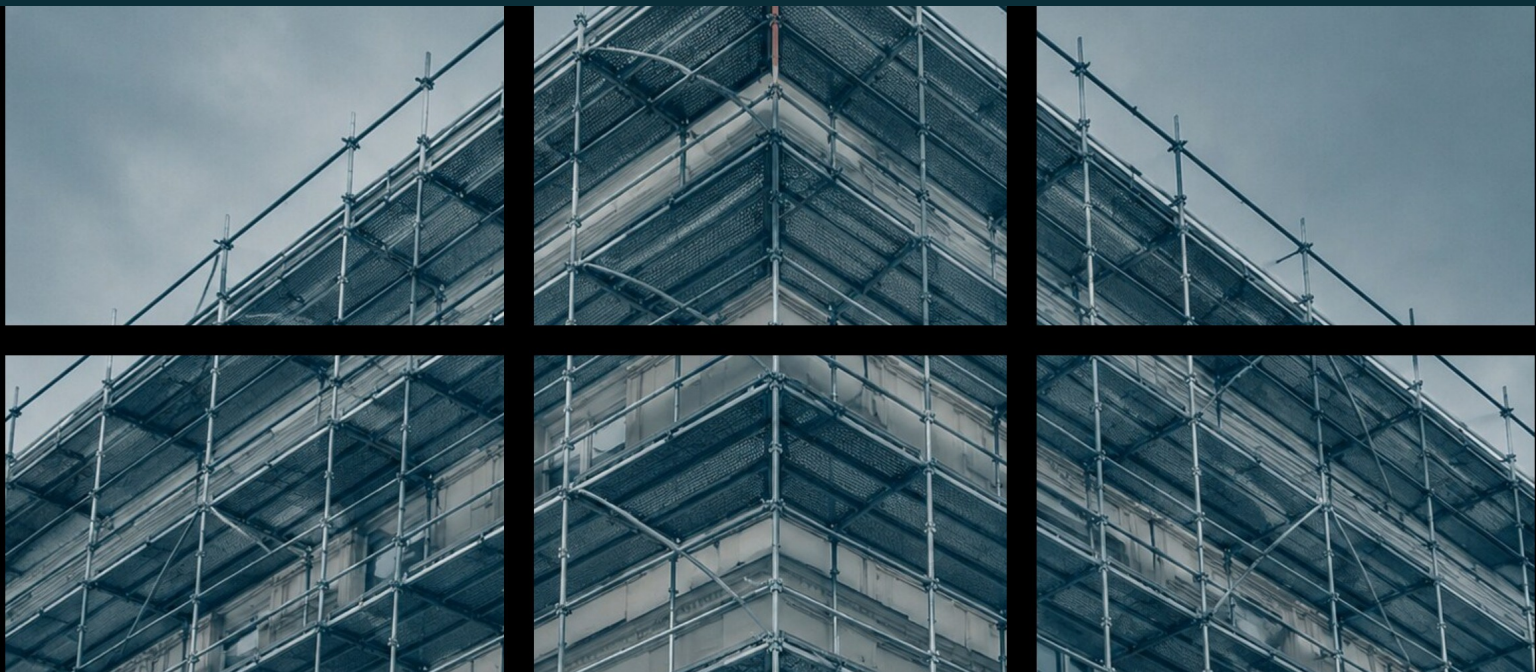


BEYOND THE PASSED GATE

Adopted, Never Adapted: Why Governance Frameworks Harden Into Ceremony

When following the standard quietly becomes a way of avoiding the decision — governance in large-scale transformation



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*“A framework is a hypothesis about how decisions should be made,
written by people who had never met your organisation.”*

1. The gate that never says no

Picture a programme board that has met on the third Tuesday of every month for two years. The pack runs to forty pages and lands the Friday before; the members who read it read the first five. The chair works down the agenda, the stage-gate review is reached, the gate is approved, and the programme proceeds to its next phase. This has now happened at eleven consecutive gate reviews. Not once has a gate been failed. Not once has a programme been stopped, re-scoped, or sent back at the very point the framework reserved for stopping, re-scoping, and sending back.

Ask the people in that room whether their governance is working and they will say yes — and produce evidence. The framework is in place. The gates are held to schedule. The artefacts are complete and auditable. An external reviewer could tick every box. That is precisely the problem, because a gate that has never once said no is not a decision point. It is a milestone wearing the costume of a decision.

I have watched this pattern hold in organisations that had, on paper, done everything right: chosen a respected framework, trained their people in it, stood up a project office to run it, and implemented its every artefact faithfully. What they had not done — what almost no one does — is adapt it. And the distance between adopting a governance framework and adapting one turns out to be the distance between governance that decides and governance that merely records.

2. Adoption is acquisition; adaptation is authorship

When an organisation adopts a framework — COBIT for control, ITIL for service, PRINCE2 or MSP for programmes — it acquires something finished. The framework arrives as a complete, authoritative object, bound and branded, carrying the reassuring solidity of a thing many others have already used. Adoption is an act of acquisition, and acquisition is satisfying. There is a clean before and after: a business case, a training course, a certificate, a launch.

Adaptation is a different kind of act altogether. It means taking that finished object and deliberately changing it — pruning the artefacts that do not earn their place, rewriting the decision rights to match how authority actually flows in your organisation, retuning the cadence to your real rhythm of risk rather than to the calendar. Adaptation is authorship, and authorship exposes you. To adapt a framework you must first form a view about your own organisation that the framework cannot supply, and then own the change you make.

Here is the quiet asymmetry that decides the outcome: organisations reward acquisition and subtly punish authorship. The manager who adopts a recognised framework has bought insurance. If the programme fails, the answer is ready to hand — we followed the standard. The manager who adapts it has, in the same failure, no such shelter; they departed from the standard, and the departure is now theirs alone to defend. In a climate shaped by Sarbanes-Oxley and the audit reflex it has instilled everywhere, defensibility is not a small thing. Faithful, unadapted implementation is the safe position — so it is the position most people take.

The framework is adopted as insurance and then implemented to the letter, because the letter is what the insurance covers. Fitness to the actual organisation was never the thing being bought.

3. Why the people who bought it cannot adapt it

There is a deeper reason adaptation does not happen, and it is an uncomfortable one. Organisations often reach for an external framework precisely because they distrust their own judgement about how to govern. The framework is imported to replace judgement — to supply an answer the organisation is not confident it can supply itself. But adaptation demands exactly the judgement the framework was brought in to substitute for. You cannot tailor a governance model to your risk appetite unless you can articulate your risk appetite; you cannot prune a gate unless you can say what decision that gate exists to force. The organisation that most needs to adapt a framework is frequently the least equipped to, because the same deficit drove both the adoption and the paralysis afterwards.

Two further forces hold the framework rigid once it is in.

- Adoption has an owner; adaptation has none. A project office is chartered to run the framework — to hold the gates, assemble the packs, maintain the templates. No one is chartered to interrogate it, to ask each quarter which artefacts have stopped earning their keep. Pruning is nobody's job, and what is nobody's job does not get done.
- The artefacts are visible; the decisions are not. You can audit whether the gate was held and the form was filled. You cannot easily audit whether a real choice was made. So the measurable thing — the ceremony — is what gets managed, and the unmeasurable thing — the decision — is what quietly wastes away.

The result is a familiar tableau: a RACI chart on which everyone is Consulted and no one is Accountable in any way that bites; a risk register maintained to an immaculate professional standard that has never once altered a funding decision; a monthly pack a diligent analyst spends three days assembling that no one reads to the end. Every artefact is correct. The system they compose has stopped governing.

4. "But surely the whole point is standardisation"

The strongest objection to all of this deserves stating at full strength, because it is not foolish. The point of a framework, its defender would say, is precisely that it is standard. Consistency is the value. If every organisation — worse, every programme within an organisation — adapts the model to taste, you lose comparability across the portfolio, you

lose the auditability that boards and regulators now demand, you lose the ability to move a trained person from one programme to another and have them understand the governance on day one. And "let us adapt it to our context" is, very often, the opening move of a team that simply does not wish to be governed. Adaptation, on this view, is the thin end of a wedge whose thick end is every inconvenient control tailored quietly away.

This is right about the danger and wrong about the diagnosis. Adaptation can indeed decay into evasion — but that is a different failure from the one in front of us, and far the rarer of the two. The common failure in the field is not organisations that have watered their governance down to nothing; it is organisations drowning in governance they follow to the letter and do not use. The frameworks themselves know this. Tailoring to the environment is not a loophole smuggled in by the reluctant; it is written into the manuals. The instruction to adopt and adapt has been on the page the whole time. The failure is not that organisations adapt too freely — it is that they hear "adopt and adapt" and perform only the first half.

The distinction that keeps adaptation honest is between the intent of a control and its mechanism. A stage gate's intent is to force an explicit decision, while it can still be reversed, about whether to continue. Its mechanism — the pack, the cadence, the attendee list — is contingent. Adapting the mechanism while preserving the intent is authorship. Dropping the intent while preserving the mechanism is exactly what the unadapted framework already does: it keeps the gate and loses the decision. Real adaptation is not less rigorous than faithful implementation. It is more rigorous, because it is obliged to know what each control is actually for.

5. What governance should be held to account for

The temptation at this point is to reach for a remedy in the only shape the field instinctively trusts: another framework — a maturity model for tailoring, a methodology for adapting methodologies. Resist it. A framework for adapting frameworks would simply become one more thing to adopt and never adapt. The problem is not a missing artefact. The problem is what governance is held to account for.

Today governance is judged by its outputs: gates held, packs produced, registers maintained, the machine visibly running. It should be judged by its decisions. A governance system that has changed nothing has done nothing, however immaculate its paperwork.

*“Real governance leaves fingerprints. A system that has left
none is not cautious — it is decorative.”*

The test, then, is not is the framework in place? but what has it stopped, deferred, or reshaped that would otherwise have gone ahead? A programme killed at a gate; a scope cut because a control genuinely bit; a funding decision reversed by something surfaced in the register. Those are the fingerprints. Their absence over two years and eleven gate reviews is not a sign of a healthy portfolio. It is a sign that the governance is ornamental.

One question does most of the work, and it can be put to any governance artefact in the building: what decision is this meant to force, and who is worse off if that decision is made honestly? If the answer comes readily, the artefact is doing its job. If it does not — if the

honest answer is that the pack is assembled because the pack is always assembled — you have found a ceremony, and you can begin the authorship that adoption was supposed to spare you.

A framework is a hypothesis about how decisions should be made, written by people who had never met your organisation. Adopting it accepts the hypothesis. Adapting it tests the hypothesis against your reality. Governance fails not when organisations choose the wrong framework, but when they mistake accepting the hypothesis for having done the work, and never get around to the test.