

BEYOND DELEGATION

Benefits Ownership and the Leadership Deficit — Why Senior Leaders Delegate What They Cannot Disown

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Leadership Failure at the Heart of Benefits Accountability



Benefits Ownership and the Leadership Deficit – Why Senior Leaders Delegate What They Cannot Disown

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1. The Leadership Question Behind the Process Problem

The conversation about benefits ownership typically begins and ends as a process discussion. Who is named in the RACI? Where does the accountability sit in the programme structure? What governance mechanisms exist to track realisation? These are reasonable questions, and every programme methodology has answers to them. But they miss the deeper issue.

Benefits ownership is, at its root, a leadership problem. It fails not because organisations lack the right process, but because senior leaders – the people who commission transformation, approve the investment, and champion the change – consistently delegate the accountability for outcomes without creating the conditions under which that accountability can be discharged. The process failure is real, but it is a symptom. The cause is a failure of leadership.

2. The Delegation Pattern

The pattern I have observed across organisations is remarkably consistent. A senior leader – typically a director or equivalent – sponsors a transformation programme. They champion the business case, secure the investment, and present the expected benefits to the board. Their personal credibility is attached to the initiative. So far, so normal.

But as the programme moves into delivery, something shifts. The senior leader's attention moves to other priorities. The programme is handed to a programme director or programme manager. The benefits, which the senior leader personally committed to, are gradually redefined as someone else's responsibility. A benefits owner is named – usually someone two or three levels below the sponsoring leader, often a middle manager in the affected business area who had little involvement in shaping the business case.

This person inherits accountability for numbers they did not create, a timeline they did not set, and dependencies they cannot control. They have been given responsibility without authority, accountability without agency. The senior leader who made the commitment has, in effect, offloaded the risk while retaining the credit should things go well.

This is not delegation in any meaningful sense. It is displacement.

3. Why Leaders Behave This Way

It would be easy to attribute this to cynicism or indifference, but in my experience neither is usually the explanation. The behaviour is driven by three forces that operate on senior leaders in most large organisations.

The breadth of the portfolio. A typical director in a large organisation sponsors multiple programmes simultaneously, alongside their operational responsibilities. They cannot be the active benefits owner for every initiative in their portfolio. Delegation is inevitable. The failure is not in delegating, but in delegating without ensuring that the person receiving the accountability has what they need to succeed.

The discomfort with uncertainty. Benefits realisation is inherently uncertain. It depends on adoption, on market conditions, on the quality of implementation, on dozens of variables that cannot be controlled. Senior leaders who are comfortable committing to delivery targets — which feel concrete and controllable — are often profoundly uncomfortable with benefits targets, which feel speculative and exposed. Delegating benefits ownership puts distance between the leader and that uncertainty.

The political calculus. If benefits do not materialise, someone must explain why. If that someone is the senior leader who championed the investment, the consequences are personal and potentially career-affecting. If that someone is a middle manager three levels down, the consequences are contained. The delegation of benefits ownership is, in many organisations, an act of political risk management disguised as good governance.

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4. What Genuine Leadership Would Look Like

The leaders I have seen who take benefits seriously — and they exist, though they are rarer than they should be — do several things differently.

They stay visibly connected to the benefits case throughout the programme lifecycle, not just at approval. They attend benefits reviews personally, not through deputies. They ask hard questions about measurement baselines and attribution methodology. They challenge optimistic projections rather than encouraging them. They make it clear, through their behaviour rather than their words, that benefits realisation is a first-order priority rather than an afterthought.

Critically, they also create the conditions for honest reporting. When a benefits owner reports that realisation is behind forecast, these leaders treat it as information to be acted upon, not as a failure to be punished. They understand that the value of a benefits owner lies precisely in their willingness to tell the truth about whether the investment is paying off — and that punishing honesty guarantees that they will hear only good news until the moment the reality becomes undeniable.

They also recognise that benefits ownership cannot be bolted onto someone's existing role. It requires dedicated time, analytical support, authority to influence operational processes, and direct access to the senior leader when barriers arise. A benefits owner who is expected to discharge this accountability in the margins of their day job, with no additional resource and no escalation path, is a fiction.

5. The Systemic Dimension

Individual leadership matters, but the problem is also systemic. Most organisations' performance management systems do not recognise benefits realisation as a meaningful metric for senior leaders. Annual objectives focus on delivery milestones, financial targets, and operational performance. Benefits from transformation programmes — which may take two or three years to materialise — fall outside the annual cycle and are therefore invisible to the reward system.

Until organisations find ways to connect senior leaders' personal incentives to benefits outcomes over the timeframe that benefits actually require, the delegation pattern will persist. Leaders will continue to commit to benefits in business cases and then quietly distance themselves from the accountability once the investment is approved.

The organisations that take this seriously will need to rethink how they hold senior leaders accountable for the investments they champion. That means benefits targets in personal objectives. It means performance reviews that look back over a multi-year horizon. It means board-level scrutiny of benefits realisation that carries the same weight as financial performance reviews. And it means a cultural norm that the person who commits to the benefits is the person who remains accountable for them — not in the documentation, but in practice.

This is not primarily a process problem, and it will not be solved by better templates or more detailed RACI charts. It is a leadership problem, and it will be solved only when senior leaders accept that commissioning a transformation programme means owning its outcomes — all of them, including the ones that take years to materialise and may never fully arrive.