

BEYOND DELIVERY

Building Internal Capability While Delivering External Commitments — The Programme Leader's Impossible Balance

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Dual Delivery Challenge in Complex Programmes



Giovanni Leonardi

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1. The Trade-Off Nobody Admits

Every complex programme carries two mandates. The first is explicit: deliver the outcomes the board has approved, on time, within budget, to the quality the business requires. The second is implicit but no less important: leave the organisation stronger than you found it. Build the capability, the confidence, and the institutional muscle to sustain what the programme delivers and to take on the next challenge without starting from scratch.

In theory, these mandates are complementary. In practice, they are in constant tension — and the second almost always loses.

The pattern I have observed across programmes of every kind, in every sector, is remarkably consistent. The early stages of a programme are full of good intentions about capability-building. Internal staff are assigned to key roles. Knowledge transfer plans are drafted. Training budgets are approved. Then the programme hits its first serious delivery pressure — a milestone at risk, a dependency that has slipped, a stakeholder who needs results — and the capability agenda is quietly sacrificed. The experienced external consultant takes over the workstream the internal lead was struggling with. The training is deferred to next quarter. The knowledge transfer sessions are cancelled because everyone is too busy delivering.

Each of these decisions is defensible in isolation. Collectively, they represent a systematic failure to invest in the organisation's future.

2. Why Delivery Always Wins

The structural forces that favour delivery over capability are powerful and largely invisible to those caught up in them.

Delivery is measurable; capability is not. Programme boards review RAG statuses, milestone charts, and burn-down reports. They can see, in concrete terms, whether the programme is on track. Capability-building has no equivalent dashboard. How do you measure whether an internal team is ready to take ownership? How do you quantify the knowledge that has — or has not — been transferred? In the absence of hard metrics, capability becomes a matter of opinion, and opinion loses to data every time.

The accountability structure is asymmetric. The programme director is accountable for delivery. If the programme is late, they answer for it. If the programme delivers on time but the organisation lacks the capability to sustain the outcomes, that problem emerges months or years later — long after the programme director has moved on. The incentive structure is clear: deliver now, and let someone else worry about capability.

Speed and learning are genuinely in tension. This is the most uncomfortable truth. Building capability takes time. It requires allowing less experienced people to do work that more experienced people could do faster. It means accepting that the first attempt will not be as polished, the first decision not as sharp, the first plan not as tight. In a programme under pressure, this kind of deliberate inefficiency feels irresponsible. And so the experienced hands take over, the pace picks up, and the learning stops.

3. The Cost That Comes Later

The consequences of this pattern are predictable and severe, but they are always someone else's problem.

The programme delivers. The board declares success. The external team departs. And then the organisation discovers what it has — and has not — built. The new operating model that nobody internal fully understands. The technology platform that only the implementer's team can configure. The governance framework that was designed by consultants and has never been tested by the people who must now operate it.

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The remediation cost is substantial. Organisations find themselves re-hiring consultants to explain what the previous consultants built. They run remedial training programmes that would have been unnecessary had the learning happened during delivery. They watch carefully designed processes degrade because the people operating them were never part of designing them.

This is not an abstract risk. It is the lived experience of a significant proportion of the organisations I have worked alongside. And it is almost entirely avoidable.

4. What Holding Both Objectives Requires

The programme leader who takes capability-building seriously must be willing to make three commitments that the prevailing culture of programme delivery actively discourages.

4.1 Accept a Slower Start

Capability-building front-loads its costs. The first months of a programme that prioritises internal learning will be slower, messier, and less impressive on a status report than one that lets the experts run. This is the price of building something that lasts, and the programme leader must be able to articulate that trade-off to the board in terms they can accept.

The argument is not sentimental. It is economic. The cost of building capability during the programme is a fraction of the cost of building it afterwards — if indeed it can be built at all once the external team has left and the institutional memory has walked out the door.

4.2 Make Capability Visible in Governance

If the programme board does not see capability metrics alongside delivery metrics, capability will always be subordinate. The programme leader must design governance that makes the capability dimension visible and unavoidable.

This means tracking, at minimum: the ratio of internal to external staff in key programme roles, and the trajectory of that ratio over time; the completion of defined knowledge transfer milestones, verified by assessment rather than by attendance; the readiness of internal teams to assume ownership of each workstream, assessed honestly and reported without euphemism.

These measures will not be popular. They will frequently tell an uncomfortable story. But their absence tells a worse one — it tells the story of an organisation that chose not to look.

4.3 Protect the Capability Budget

In every programme I have observed, the capability budget is the first to be raided when delivery pressures mount. Training budgets are redirected to delivery resources. Secondment periods are shortened. Mentoring time is squeezed.

The programme leader who is serious about capability must ring-fence this investment with the same rigour applied to the technology budget or the infrastructure spend. It is not discretionary. It is not a nice-to-have. It is the mechanism by which the programme's benefits become sustainable, and without it, the programme's business case is built on sand.

5. The Role of the Sponsoring Organisation

It would be unfair to place this burden entirely on the programme leader. The sponsoring organisation — the board, the executive team, the senior responsible owner — must create the conditions in which dual delivery is possible.

This means, above all, being honest about timescales. A programme that must deliver in twelve months what genuinely requires eighteen will never build capability, because every spare hour will be consumed by the delivery imperative. The decision to compress a timeline is, in effect, a decision to sacrifice capability — and it should be recognised as such.

It also means holding programme leaders accountable for both mandates, not just the first. If the programme delivers on time but the organisation cannot sustain the outcomes, that is not success. If the programme is three months late but the internal team can operate independently from day one, that may be a better result by any measure that matters.

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6. A Practitioner's Reflection

The dual delivery challenge is not a problem that can be solved once and forgotten. It is a tension that must be managed actively throughout the life of the programme. There will be moments when delivery must take priority – genuine crises that demand all hands on the immediate task. The discipline is in returning to the capability agenda once the crisis passes, rather than allowing the crisis mindset to become permanent.

The organisations that get this right are not the ones with the best methodologies or the most sophisticated governance frameworks. They are the ones whose leaders have the conviction to say: we will be slower today so that we are stronger tomorrow. That conviction is rare. It is also, in my experience, the single most reliable predictor of whether a programme's benefits will endure beyond the lifetime of the programme itself.

The next generation of complex programmes will be larger, more interdependent, and more demanding than anything we have seen. The organisations that enter them having learned nothing from the last programme – because the last programme delivered but did not teach – will find themselves buying the same capability they bought before, at the same cost, with the same result. The cycle will continue until someone decides to break it. And that decision starts with the programme leader who refuses to treat capability as optional.