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Building a PMO from Scratch — the First 100 Days

A Practitioner's Perspective on PMO Establishment in Complex Organisations



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“The organisations that built lasting PMOs were the ones that stopped trying to build a PMO and started trying to solve a problem that nobody else was solving.”

1. The Promise and the Problem

There is a pattern to how PMOs come into being that anyone who has lived through it will recognise. A senior leader, usually newly appointed or freshly bruised by a programme failure, announces that the organisation needs a PMO. A business case is written. Headcount is approved. Someone is appointed — often a capable programme manager pulled sideways — and told to “set it up.” The assumption, rarely examined, is that establishing a PMO is itself a manageable project: define the scope, hire the team, deploy the tools, communicate the mandate.

In my experience, this assumption is where most PMO establishments begin to fail. Not because the people involved lack competence, but because the act of building a PMO is fundamentally different from the act of running a programme. A programme has a sponsor, a defined outcome, and — in theory — a mandate that precedes the programme manager's arrival. A new PMO has none of these things in any reliable form. The sponsor is often the person who had the idea, not the person who controls the resources the PMO will need to influence. The outcome is described in language so broad it could mean anything. And the mandate exists on paper but not in the corridors where decisions are actually made.

2. What the First Thirty Days Actually Look Like

The textbooks suggest that the first phase of PMO establishment should focus on defining the operating model: what services the PMO will provide, what governance it will own, what tools it will standardise. This is sensible advice and almost entirely wrong as a starting point.

What the first thirty days actually require is political reconnaissance. The new PMO lead needs to understand, before anything else, three things:

- Who currently makes decisions about programme priorities, and through what mechanism?
- Who believes they already perform the functions the PMO is being created to deliver?
- Where are the active fires — the programmes in genuine trouble — that will define the PMO's early reputation whether it chooses to engage with them or not?

These questions cannot be answered by reading organisation charts or terms of reference. They are answered by sitting in rooms, listening to what is said and what is not said, and mapping the informal decision architecture that every organisation maintains alongside its formal one.

The PMO lead who spends the first month designing templates and governance frameworks will emerge at week five with a beautiful operating model and no allies. The one who spends the first month understanding the territory will have a rougher set of documents but a far clearer sense of where the PMO can actually add value — and, critically, where it will face resistance.

3. The Mandate Gap

Every PMO establishment I have observed has encountered what I think of as the mandate gap: the distance between the authority the PMO has been given on paper and the authority it can actually exercise.

The mandate gap is not a failure of governance design. It is a structural feature of how organisations work. A PMO is typically created by a decision at one level of the organisation — the executive committee, the transformation board, the CIO's leadership team — and must then operate across multiple levels and functions that were not party to that decision and may not agree with it. The programme directors whose reporting the PMO is supposed to standardise did not ask for standardisation. The finance team whose data the PMO needs for portfolio reporting has its own reporting cycle and its own priorities. The IT function that controls the tools the PMO wants to deploy has a change freeze.

The pattern I have observed across organisations is that the mandate gap cannot be closed by escalation. Escalating to the sponsor every time a stakeholder resists the PMO's authority is a strategy that works precisely twice before the sponsor begins to wonder whether the PMO lead can manage stakeholders at all. The mandate gap is closed — to the extent it ever is — by demonstrated value.

4. The Value Trap

This creates what is arguably the central paradox of PMO establishment: the PMO must demonstrate value before it has the authority to do the things that would create value.

The resolution, in practice, is almost always the same. The PMO finds one or two early problems it can solve — a programme that lacks a consolidated risk view, a portfolio that has no single source of truth for status, a governance meeting that everyone attends but nobody finds useful — and solves them visibly and quickly. Not by imposing a framework, but by doing something useful that nobody else was doing.

The PMO that establishes itself successfully is the one that finds the gap nobody else is filling and fills it before anyone asks.

This is unglamorous work. It rarely appears in the PMO's terms of reference. But it is the mechanism by which a PMO earns the informal authority that its formal mandate cannot provide.

5. Day Sixty: the Governance Question

By the second month, the pressure to formalise governance becomes unavoidable. The sponsor wants to see a governance framework. The programme directors want to know what they are expected to report and to whom. The PMO team — if recruitment has gone well, there are now three or four people — wants to know what their roles actually are.

The temptation at this point is to design comprehensive governance: stage gates for every programme, standardised reporting across every workstream, a RAID log template that captures everything. In my experience, this temptation should be resisted with considerable force.

The governance framework that works in the first 100 days is the minimum viable governance: the fewest possible controls that address the most pressing decision-making gaps. Which programmes are in genuine trouble and how do we know? What decisions need to be made this month about resource allocation? Which interdependencies between programmes are creating risk that no single programme manager can see?

Three questions. A PMO that can answer these three questions reliably, consistently, and in a form that senior leaders actually use, has established more value than one with a comprehensive governance manual that nobody reads.

6. The Team Question

Recruitment into a new PMO is harder than it appears. The challenge is not finding people with programme management skills — those are relatively available. The challenge is finding people who can operate in the ambiguity that characterises a PMO's first months.

A new PMO needs people who can build relationships across organisational boundaries without formal authority, who can produce useful analysis from incomplete data, and who can tolerate the discomfort of being simultaneously expected to enforce standards and expected not to get in anyone's way. This is a specific set of capabilities, and it does not map neatly onto the typical programme management competency framework.

- The analyst who can turn messy data from six different programme trackers into a single portfolio view that tells a coherent story
- The governance specialist who can design a light-touch assurance process that programme directors will actually use rather than circumvent
- The relationship builder who can sit in a programme board meeting, identify the three things that matter, and feed them back to the PMO lead without being seen as a spy

These are the people who make a PMO work in its early months. They are not easy to find, and they are not cheap. The organisation that funds a PMO but staffs it with whoever is available from the bench is an organisation that has decided, whether it knows it or not, that the PMO will fail.

7. What Day 100 Should Look Like

By day 100, if the establishment has gone reasonably well, the PMO should have achieved something quite specific: it should be the place that people go when they need to understand what is happening across the portfolio.

Not the place that produces reports. Not the place that enforces templates. Not the place that runs governance meetings. The place that knows.

This is a subtler achievement than it sounds. It means the PMO has built sufficient relationships to receive information that does not appear in formal reporting. It means the PMO's analysis is trusted enough that senior leaders use it to make decisions rather than commissioning their own. It means the PMO has navigated the mandate gap well enough that programme directors see it as a source of support rather than a source of overhead.

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8. The Lessons the Textbooks Miss

The literature on PMO establishment — and by 2007 there is a growing body of it — tends to focus on what a PMO should be: its functions, its governance model, its position in the organisational structure. This is necessary but insufficient. What the literature largely misses is the process of becoming: how a PMO moves from an idea in a business case to a functioning part of the organisational fabric.

That process is not primarily about frameworks, tools, or methodologies. It is about politics, relationships, and the patient accumulation of demonstrated value. The PMO lead who understands this — who treats the first 100 days as a campaign of influence rather than a project of implementation — is the one who will still be in post at day 200.

The one who does not will have built something that looks like a PMO on the organisation chart but functions as an administrative overhead that the next restructure will quietly remove.