

BEYOND THE MATURITY SCORE

Capability Maturity Is a Muscle, Not a Milestone

Why the capability a programme builds so often dies with it — and what the maturity models fail to measure



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1. The morning after go-live

There is a photograph that gets taken at the end of every major programme. The team is gathered in front of a screen showing green across the board; someone has brought in something sparkling; the sponsor says a few warm words about a journey and a milestone. Within a fortnight the contractors have rolled off, the secondees have gone back to their day jobs, the programme director is being courted for the next big thing, and the temporary organisation that knew how to do the hard thing has been, quite deliberately, dissolved. It was always meant to be temporary. That was the point.

Eighteen months later the organisation needs to do something very similar — extend the platform, absorb an acquisition onto it, respond to a change nobody foresaw — and discovers that it cannot. The method exists, documented, on a shared drive. The trained people exist, mostly, scattered back into the line. What has gone is the thing that actually did the work: the collective, practised judgement of a group that knew how to make decisions together under pressure. The muscle has wasted, and no one noticed it wasting, because nothing was lifting.

This is the argument I want to make plainly: capability maturity is a muscle, not a milestone. It is not a level you attain and bank. It is a physical capacity that exists only while it is under load, and that begins to atrophy the moment the load is removed — which is to say, the moment the programme that built it is disbanded. Nearly everything the current maturity models teach us to measure encourages us to miss this, because they measure the presence of capability's artefacts rather than the retention of its judgement.

2. What the models measure, and what they miss

I should be fair to the maturity models, because they were an advance and I have used them to good effect. Before them, an organisation's competence at running programmes was a matter of anecdote and self-flattery. The staged assessments — which rate an organisation from an initial, heroic, individual-dependent state up through defined and managed to something approaching optimising — gave us a shared language and, crucially, a way to argue for investment. Told it sits at the lowest level, a board that would never fund "getting better at programmes" will fund the climb to the third. That is not nothing.

But watch what the assessment actually inspects. It inspects whether processes are defined — whether the method is written down. It inspects whether roles are described, whether governance forums exist, whether templates and gates and registers are in place. Every one of these is an artefact — a residue that capability leaves behind, like the chalk on a climber's hands. And here is the error at the centre of how we use these models: we have quietly come to believe that the presence of the residue is the same as the presence of the

capability. It is not. An organisation can hold every artefact of a respectable maturity level — the handbook, the trained roster, the gate reviews — and be unable to lift anything at all, because the people who could once turn those artefacts into decisions have dispersed, and the group has forgotten how it used to think.

A maturity model measures whether the method is written down. It cannot measure whether the organisation could still enact it tomorrow with the people it has left. Those are different questions, and only the second one matters when the next programme starts.

3. The assessment that could not lift

Let me make this concrete. I observed an organisation that had, at real expense, taken itself through a formal capability assessment and earned a defensible, middle-of-the-scale rating. The handbook was excellent. It had put some forty people through accredited training in its chosen programme method. On paper, mature.

When the next major programme launched, it could not reconstitute its own planning capability. Of the forty trained people, perhaps four had ever used the method under real load — on a live programme, with a sponsor leaning on them and a plan that was wrong by week three; the rest had passed an exam and returned to business as usual, where nothing required them to practise. The judgement — how hard to push back on an estimate, when a dependency was really a threat in disguise, how to hold a plan steady while it was being rewritten underneath you — lived in those four, and two of them had since left. The organisation had certified forty and retained the muscle in fewer than a handful, and its maturity rating had told it none of this, because the rating counted the trained and not the practised.

That gap — between the forty who were qualified and the four who were capable — is the whole of the matter. Training produces the qualified. Only sustained load produces, and preserves, the capable.

4. Maturity decays because judgement is perishable

Why should capability behave like muscle rather than like knowledge? Because the core of programme capability is not information but judgement, and judgement is perishable in a way that facts are not. A fact, once written down, stays true on the shelf. A judgement — the practised sense of when a green status is lying, of which risk on a register of two hundred will actually be the one that bites — exists only in people, decays in those people when it is not exercised, and cannot be transferred by documentation because it was never fully verbal to begin with. You cannot write down the thing that makes an experienced programme director worth three inexperienced ones. You can only keep them lifting.

This is why the disbanding of a programme team is so much more costly than it appears on the resourcing plan. The plan shows people released, a cost saved. What it does not show is a capability dissolved — a group that had, over eighteen hard months, become genuinely good at deciding together, scattered back into roles that will never ask them to do it again, their judgement quietly going stale. By the time the organisation needs that capability once more, it is not merely released. It is gone, and it must be rebuilt from close to

nothing, usually by hiring back the very people it let go, at a rate that reflects their new scarcity.

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5. Building the muscle that survives

If maturity is a muscle, then the task is not to reach a level but to keep the muscle under load between programmes — and that is a different and less comfortable ambition than the one the models set. It means treating the retention of practised judgement, not the accumulation of artefacts, as the thing being managed. Three consequences follow.

The first is that a standing core matters more than a trained crowd. A small number of people who move from live programme to live programme, always under real load, will hold more genuine capability than a large roster who were trained once and returned to the line. The instinct to disband entirely and “release the efficiencies” is precisely the instinct that lets the muscle waste; keeping a deliberate core in continuous practice is what preserves it, and it is cheaper than rebuilding from scratch every eighteen months, though the accounting rarely shows this.

The second is that the assessment should be inverted. Do not ask whether the method is defined; ask whether the organisation could staff and run its most demanding programme tomorrow, from its own people, without emergency hiring. That single question tells you more about real maturity than any staged model, because it measures the capable rather than the qualified.

The third is that between-programme load must be manufactured on purpose. Muscle kept idle wastes; so the organisation serious about capability finds ways to keep its core lifting between the flagship programmes — on smaller changes, on reviews of others' work, on the genuinely difficult problems that would otherwise be sent outside. Not busywork, but real decisions with real consequences, because only those preserve judgement.

I am conscious that this cuts against the grain of a moment that is, as I write, tightening. Credit has become suddenly expensive and nervous after a summer that reminded everyone what a run on a bank looks like, and the reflex when money tightens is to disband everything temporary and release every cost that can be released. I understand the reflex. But the capability an organisation dissolves in a hard quarter is exactly the capability it will pay a premium to rebuild when conditions ease, and the maturity certificate on the wall will not have warned it, because the certificate was measuring the wrong thing all along.

6. The milestone and the muscle

The maturity models gave the field a language it badly needed, and I would not give it back. But a language can also mislead, and this one has taught a generation of us to treat capability as something an organisation has — a level, a score, a certificate — rather than something an organisation does, and stops being able to do the moment it stops. The

programme that goes live to applause and disbands the following fortnight has not banked its maturity. It has set it down; and unless someone keeps it under load, it will find, when it next reaches for that strength, that the muscle has quietly wasted while the certificate stayed exactly where it was on the wall.