

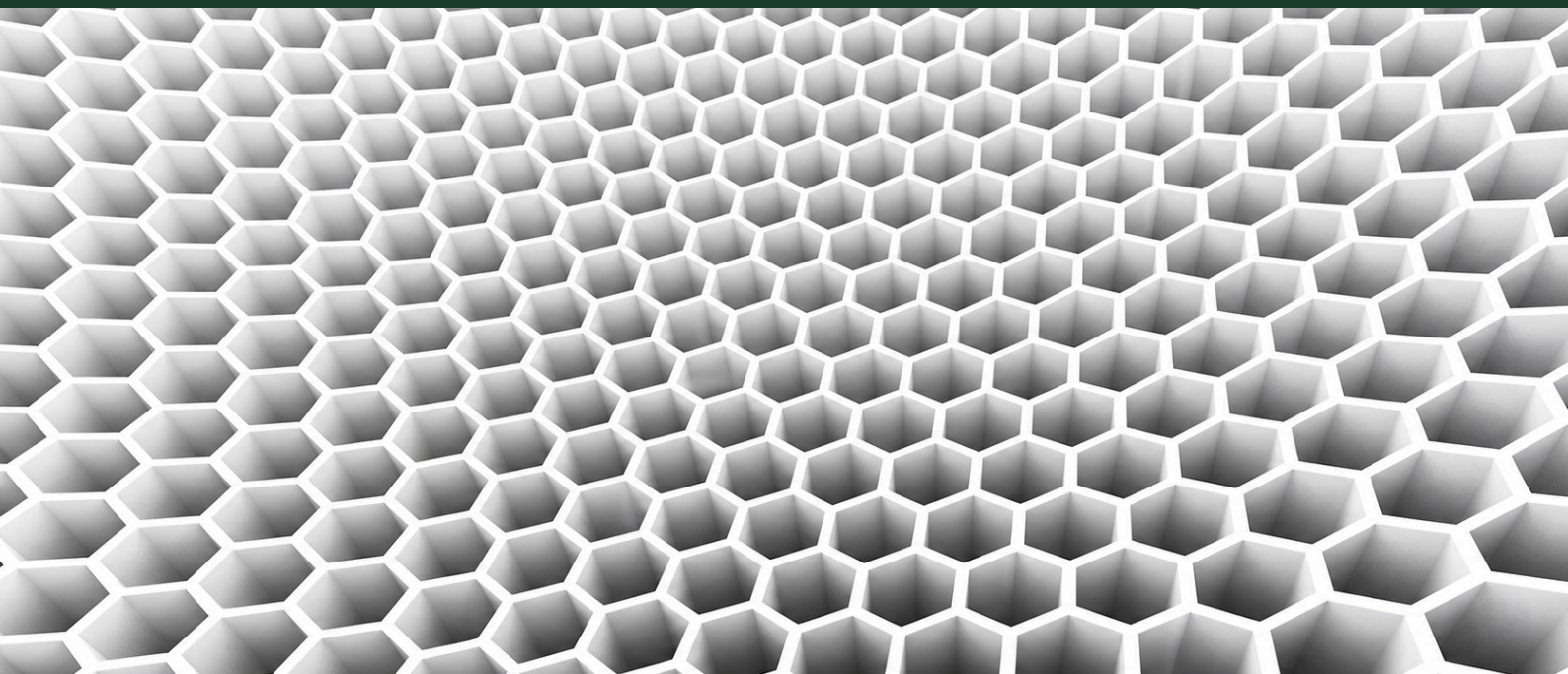
BEYOND THE CEREMONY

Crisis Programme Management — Twelve Weeks of Delivery That Took Twelve Years

A White Paper on What Emergency Delivery Reveals About Normal-Time Programme Management

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1. The Natural Experiment

We are five weeks into what may be the most significant unplanned experiment in programme delivery that the profession has ever witnessed. Across sectors — financial services, healthcare, government, retail, logistics — organisations are delivering programme outcomes at a speed that would have been dismissed as fantasy two months ago. Technology deployments that were on three-year roadmaps have gone live. Process changes that had been debated for a decade have been implemented in days. Entire operating models have been redesigned, tested, and operationalised in a timeframe that no programme board would ever have sanctioned.

The standard explanation is that crisis creates urgency, and urgency compresses timelines. This is true but insufficient. Urgency alone does not explain how programmes that were genuinely believed to require years of careful sequencing, dependency management, and phased delivery are now being completed in weeks. Something more fundamental is at work, and understanding it matters — not just for how we manage the current crisis, but for how we think about programme management when normal conditions return.

2. The Governance Paradox

The most striking feature of crisis programme delivery is not what has been added but what has been removed. Governance structures that would normally gate every significant decision have been suspended or radically simplified. Stage-gate processes that required weeks of preparation and multiple review cycles have been replaced by daily stand-ups with empowered decision-makers. Business cases that would normally run to dozens of pages have been reduced to a single question: does this keep us operating?

This is not recklessness. The decisions being made are not uninformed — they are informed differently. Instead of elaborate documentation reviewed by committees, the evidence base is direct observation, rapid feedback, and the judgement of practitioners

who understand the domain. Instead of sequential approval chains, decisions are made by small groups with genuine authority and immediate accountability.

The paradox is this: the governance that was removed was supposed to be protecting value. It existed, in theory, to ensure that programme decisions were sound, risks were managed, and investments were justified. Its removal should, by any conventional analysis, have led to worse outcomes. Yet the observable pattern across sectors is that programme delivery has accelerated dramatically, and the outcomes — while imperfect and carrying known technical debt — are functional, valuable, and in many cases superior to what the original programmes would have produced.

Governance was designed to prevent bad decisions. Its removal, under crisis conditions, has so far produced faster and arguably better ones. This is not an argument against governance — it is an argument against the specific form it has taken.

3. Three Structural Factors Behind the Acceleration

The speed of crisis delivery is not explained by any single cause. Three structural factors, operating simultaneously, account for most of what we are observing.

3.1 The Collapse of the Permission Gap

In normal times, the distance between identifying a need and receiving permission to act is measured in weeks or months. Requirements must be documented. Options must be appraised. Business cases must be written, reviewed, challenged, and approved. Budgets must be allocated through annual planning cycles. Resources must be negotiated across competing priorities. Each step adds time, and each handoff adds the risk of delay, misunderstanding, or reversal.

Under crisis conditions, this permission gap has collapsed almost entirely. The people closest to the problem are being trusted to define the solution and execute it. Budgets are being reallocated on the authority of individual directors rather than investment committees. The question has shifted from should we do this? to how fast can we do it?

3.2 The Removal of Artificial Dependencies

Programme plans in normal times are characterised by elaborate dependency networks — chains of prerequisites that sequence work across workstreams, release windows, and organisational boundaries. Many of these dependencies are genuine: you cannot test what has not been built, and you cannot build what has not been designed. But a significant proportion are artificial — dependencies that exist because of organisational structure, procurement process, or simple habit rather than technical necessity.

The crisis has forced a rapid distinction between the two. Dependencies that are genuinely technical remain. Dependencies that are procedural — waiting for a procurement cycle, aligning with another team's planning cadence, scheduling around governance calendars — have simply been bypassed. The result is that the critical path

through most programmes has shortened dramatically, not because the work itself has changed but because the administrative overhead around it has been stripped away.

3.3 The Clarification of Scope

Perhaps the most significant factor is the radical simplification of scope that crisis conditions impose. In normal times, programme scope expands to accommodate stakeholder expectations, regulatory interpretation, competitive positioning, and the accumulated wishes of everyone who touches the requirements process. The result is programmes that attempt to do everything, take years, and frequently deliver less value than a simpler solution would have provided.

Under crisis conditions, scope has been defined by operational necessity. What is the minimum that allows us to function? What can we deliver this week that keeps the organisation viable? This ruthless focus on the essential has produced solutions that are narrower but faster, and — critically — that deliver genuine value to users rather than satisfying a requirements document that nobody reads.

4. The Quality Question

The obvious objection to this analysis is quality. Surely the speed of delivery has come at the cost of robustness, security, compliance, and long-term maintainability. This objection deserves serious engagement, because it is partly right.

Technical debt is being accumulated at an extraordinary rate. Solutions built in days do not have the architectural integrity of solutions designed over months. Testing has been abbreviated. Documentation is sparse or absent. Security reviews have been compressed or deferred. These are real costs, and they will need to be addressed.

But the quality objection is also partly wrong, in a way that matters. The assumption embedded in normal programme management is that longer timelines produce higher quality. The evidence for this assumption is weaker than the profession typically acknowledges. Extended delivery timelines introduce their own quality risks: requirements drift, technology obsolescence, team turnover, loss of momentum, and the gradual divergence between what was designed and what is actually needed. A solution delivered in three weeks and iterated based on real user feedback may, in practice, be closer to what the organisation needs than a solution delivered in three years based on requirements that were gathered before the world changed.

5. What This Means for the Profession

This paper is not an argument for permanent crisis management. Operating at this intensity is not sustainable, and the shortcuts being taken now will need to be addressed. But the experience of the past five weeks poses questions that the programme management profession cannot afford to ignore.

The first question is about governance. If programmes can deliver successfully with radically simplified governance, what is the justification for the elaborate structures that characterise normal-time delivery? This is not a rhetorical question — there are legitimate answers, particularly around risk management, regulatory compliance, and fiduciary responsibility. But those answers need to be specific and evidence-based, not simply assertions that more governance is always better.

The second question is about speed. If the primary constraints on delivery speed are organisational rather than technical, then the profession's focus on technical delivery methodology may be misplaced. The biggest gains in programme performance may come not from better planning tools or more sophisticated scheduling, but from addressing the structural impediments — approval processes, dependency management, scope governance — that slow delivery down.

The third question is about trust. Crisis delivery works because leaders are trusting practitioners to make decisions. This trust is being extended out of necessity, not philosophy. But the results suggest that the default level of trust in normal programme management — the assumption that every significant decision must be escalated, reviewed, and approved — may be actively harmful to delivery outcomes.

6. The Recommendation

The recommendation of this paper is not to dismantle programme governance, but to rebuild it from evidence rather than tradition. When normal conditions return, organisations should resist the instinct to simply reinstate the structures that existed before. Instead, they should ask three questions of every governance mechanism, approval process, and dependency chain:

1. Did its absence during the crisis lead to a measurable negative outcome?
2. Does it address a risk that is genuinely present, or a risk that is theoretically possible but practically remote?
3. Does the value it protects exceed the cost — in time, speed, and practitioner autonomy — that it imposes?

Any governance mechanism that cannot answer these questions convincingly should be retired, not restored.

The uncomfortable question is not why programmes delivered so fast under crisis conditions, but why they delivered so slowly under normal ones. The answer, I suspect, will prove more damaging to the profession's assumptions than most practitioners are yet ready to accept.