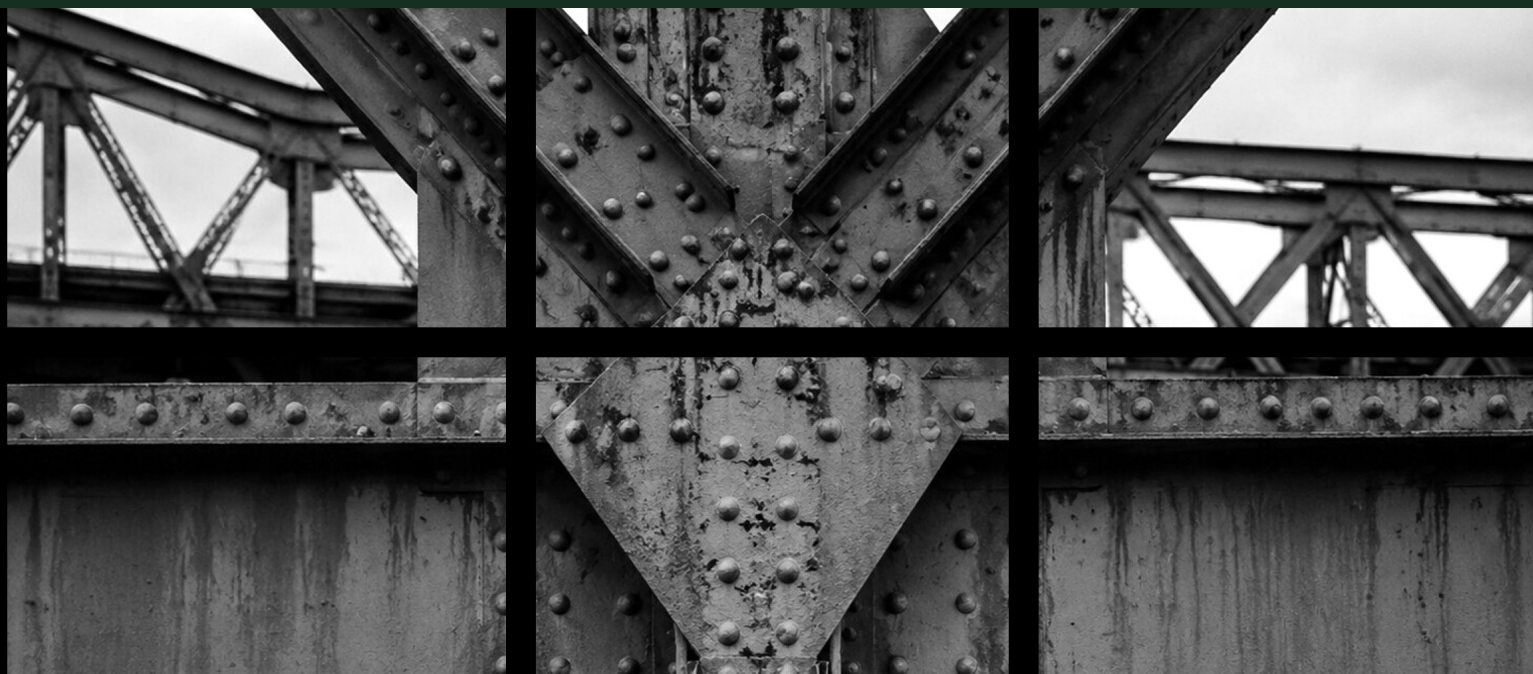


BEYOND THE HIGHLIGHT REPORT

Governance Without Decisions: Why Programme Boards Became Status Meetings

On the quiet drift from decision-making body to reporting ritual — and what it costs the transformations that depend on it



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“A body that only receives cannot govern; it can only witness.”

1. Executive Summary

Across our sector, the programme board — the body meant to steer the largest and most consequential changes an organisation undertakes — has drifted into something smaller and safer: a monthly status meeting. It receives reports, notes progress, and disperses, having decided almost nothing. This essay is an attempt to understand why.

The drift is not the work of weak individuals or bad intentions. It is produced by structure: by the reporting artefacts we place at the centre of the agenda, by the incentives that make green the only comfortable colour, by boards assembled for seniority rather than for the decisions they must make, and above all by the confusion — sharpened in these compliance-conscious years — between governing a programme and assuring it. A board built to receive assurance will, in time, forget how to decide.

The cost is not administrative. It is the widening gap between transformation intent and transformation reality. When the one forum with the authority to change a programme's direction spends its time confirming that the programme is proceeding as reported, direction ceases to be governed at all. The decisions that matter migrate elsewhere — into corridors, into the sponsor's office, into the silence between meetings — or they are not made, which is itself the most expensive decision of all.

What follows traces the anatomy of the drift, names the structural forces that sustain it, takes seriously the argument that status reporting is a legitimate and necessary function, and sets out what a board that has remembered its purpose actually looks like on a Tuesday afternoon.

2. The Forty-Minute Silence

Consider a scene familiar to anyone who has sat on the governing body of a large change programme. It is the third Tuesday of the month. Eleven people are in the room — the sponsor, three directors whose functions are touched by the programme, the programme director, the finance business partner, a representative from the group project office, and a handful of others whose presence is by now traditional rather than reasoned. A highlight report of some sixteen pages was circulated on Friday. The programme director takes the board through it. Milestone by milestone, workstream by workstream, the status is walked through: mostly green, two ambers with recovery plans attached, no reds. Questions are asked, and they are good questions, but they are questions about the report — why is that workstream amber, when will it return to green — not questions about the programme. The actions from the previous meeting are reviewed. Around the forty-minute mark, the substantive content is exhausted. The remaining time is filled, courteously, and the meeting closes on schedule. Everyone agrees it was a good meeting, by which they mean it

was an efficient one.

Nothing was decided, because the meeting was not built to decide. It was built to receive. And a body that only receives cannot govern; it can only witness.

I have watched this pattern hold across programmes that had nothing else in common – different sectors, different scales, different methodologies dutifully applied. In one back-office consolidation, budgeted at some thirty-eight million pounds, a single systems-integration milestone was reported amber, with a recovery plan, for four consecutive boards while its date slipped quietly from March to July. Each month the board received the amber, noted the recovery plan, and moved on. When the milestone finally turned red in the fifth month, the only action available to the board was to record that it had done so. The decision that might have mattered – to re-scope, to re-sequence, to stop and confront the integration approach – had a natural home four months earlier, and that home had been used, on each occasion, to note an amber.

This is the phenomenon this essay is concerned with. Not incompetence, not neglect, but the slow substitution of reporting for governing, so gradual that no one in the room ever experiences the moment it occurs.

3. How Reporting Comes to Author the Agenda

The first force is the most easily overlooked, because it hides inside a document everyone regards as helpful: the highlight report itself. Whatever our chosen method calls it – the highlight report of the structured project method, the dashboard, the monthly pack – this artefact does something more powerful than inform. It sets the agenda. A board reads what it is given, and it discusses what it reads. When the pack is organised as a status narrative – RAG ratings by workstream, milestones against plan, budget consumed against budget forecast, a risk and issue register – the meeting becomes a walk through that narrative. The structure of the document becomes the structure of the conversation.

Notice what a status pack, by its nature, does not contain. It does not contain the two or three genuine choices the programme is facing in the coming quarter, laid out with their options and their trade-offs. It does not ask the board to decide anything; it asks the board to acknowledge something. The verb of a status report is to note. And a governing body fed a steady diet of things to note will, meeting by meeting, become an organ of acknowledgement.

The reporting artefact is never neutral. Whatever sits at the centre of the pack becomes the centre of the meeting – and a pack built to convey status will, reliably, produce a meeting built to receive it.

There is a deeper problem in the RAG rating that anchors most of these packs. A red-amber-green status is a compression: it takes a rich, uncertain, contested situation and reduces it to a single colour. Compression is useful – a board cannot hold the full detail of every workstream in its head – but the particular compression of RAG is optimised for reassurance, not for decision. Green says proceed; it does not say here is the choice you must make. Amber says watch this; it does not say here are your options, and here is what each will cost you. The vocabulary of status has no word for a decision, and so a meeting conducted in that vocabulary rarely arrives at one.

4. The Gravity That Pulls Everything Green

If the artefact shapes the meeting, the incentive shapes the artefact. Consider the position of a programme director preparing a highlight report for a board of superiors. To report red is to invite scrutiny, to summon help that may arrive as interference, to concede in writing that the thing entrusted to you is not going to plan. To report green is to be left alone to fix it. The rational, and deeply human, response is to hold a status at amber for as long as amber can plausibly be defended, and to move to red only when the situation has become undeniable — which is to say, only when it is too late for the board to do anything but absorb the news.

This is not dishonesty. It is optimism operating under pressure, and it is reinforced by every part of the surrounding system. A programme director who reports steadily green is regarded as in control. One who surfaces problems early is, too often, regarded as the problem. The result is a reporting layer that runs several degrees more optimistic than reality, and a board that receives, in good faith, a picture systematically bleached of the very difficulties it exists to confront.

The consequence for governance is severe. By the time a problem is red enough to appear unambiguously in the pack, the window in which the board might have shaped the response has usually closed. The board is left governing the past — ratifying situations that have already resolved themselves, one way or another, in the weeks since the report was written. A board that governs only what is certain governs only what is already too late to change.

5. Assembled for Status, Not for Decision

The third force lies in the composition of the board itself, and here we touch something particular to these years. We are living through a period in which governance and control have become closely, and sometimes indistinguishably, entwined. The wave of corporate scandals earlier in the decade, and the regulatory response that followed, has made assurance the watchword of the boardroom. Committees exist to demonstrate control, to evidence oversight, to show that a responsible mechanism was watching. The instinct is entirely reasonable in its place — and it has quietly reshaped what we imagine a programme board is for.

A board convened to demonstrate oversight is assembled differently from a board convened to make decisions. It is assembled for seniority, because seniority is what makes the oversight credible. It grows large, because inclusion is what makes it defensible — every function that might later ask "why was I not consulted" is given a seat. And it meets to a fixed calendar, because regularity is itself a form of evidence. Each of these instincts serves assurance well. Each of them is corrosive to decision.

- A board of eleven cannot deliberate; it can only receive presentations. Genuine decision-making has a natural upper bound of participants, beyond which the meeting becomes a broadcast.
- A board assembled by rank rather than by relevance will contain people who cannot make the decision at hand and lack the context to shape it — and will often be missing the one or two people who could.
- A board that meets because the calendar says so, rather than because a decision is ripe, will find its agenda filled with whatever is available. What is always available is status.

The confusion runs deep enough that the two purposes are rarely distinguished aloud. We say "governance" and mean, without noticing the substitution, "assurance." But they are not the same activity. Assurance asks: is this programme being run properly, and can we evidence that it is? Governance asks: given what we now know, is this still the right programme, run the right way, and what must we change? The first can be satisfied by a good report. The second cannot be satisfied by any report at all — it requires a decision, and decisions require a body built to make them.

Assurance asks whether a programme is being run properly. Governance asks whether it is still the right programme. A board that cannot tell these questions apart will answer only the first — and will believe it has answered both.

6. The Case for the Status Meeting

It would be too easy to leave the argument there, as though status reporting were simply a failure of nerve. The honest position is more difficult, because there is a real case for the status meeting, and it deserves to be met at its strongest.

The case runs like this. A board is accountable, and accountability requires visibility; a board that does not know the state of its programme cannot be said to be governing it at all. Status reporting is the mechanism of that visibility. Furthermore, most of what a well-run programme does from month to month genuinely does not require a board decision — the programme director is paid to run the programme, and a board that reaches in to decide operational matters is not governing but meddling. On this view, a board that mostly receives status and only occasionally decides is not failing; it is correctly calibrated, intervening rarely because rare intervention is the mark of a healthy delegation. And in an age when demonstrable oversight is not optional but expected, the ritual of regular reporting is not empty — it is the evidence that responsible governance occurred.

Every part of this is true, and it is precisely why the drift is so hard to resist: it is the exaggeration of a virtue, not the presence of a vice. Visibility is necessary. Most months do pass without a board-level decision. Over-reaching boards are a real and destructive failure. The reply is not that status is illegitimate — it is that status is the floor of governance, not its substance. A board that has visibility and never uses it to decide has met the necessary condition and mistaken it for the sufficient one. The trouble is not that these boards report status; it is that reporting status is all they do, and that the machinery of reporting has grown so dominant that when a genuine decision does arrive, there is no room left on the agenda, no shape to the conversation, and no habit in the room to receive it. The rare intervention that was meant to justify the delegation never comes, because the board has lost the muscle to perform it.

7. What a Deciding Board Looks Like

If the drift is structural, so is the recovery. A board does not become a decision-making body by exhortation — by a chair urging everyone to "be more strategic." It becomes one by changing the structures that produced the status meeting in the first place. Four changes do most of the work.

1. Put decisions, not status, at the head of the pack. The first page a board reads should not be a RAG summary; it should be the two or three decisions or open questions the board is being asked to resolve this quarter, each expressed as a genuine choice with its options, its trade-offs, and a recommendation. Status still belongs in the pack – as an appendix, as the floor, as the context for the decisions – but it no longer authors the agenda. The verb of the first page becomes to decide.
2. Govern by exception and tolerance, by design. The mature methods of our discipline already contain the mechanism, in the concept of tolerance: the programme is delegated authority to proceed within agreed boundaries of time, cost and scope, and the board is engaged precisely when those boundaries are threatened. Used properly, tolerance inverts the meeting. The board stops reviewing everything that is proceeding to plan – which is most things, and none of which needs it – and concentrates its scarce attention on the exceptions, which are exactly the decisions. A well-set tolerance is what allows a board to receive less status and make more decisions without meddling.
3. Escalate options, not colours. When something goes wrong, the programme should arrive at the board not with a red rating and a recovery plan already chosen, but with the situation and the realistic options for responding to it, including what each would cost. The difference is the difference between a board that ratifies and a board that decides. A recovery plan presented as a completed artefact invites a nod; a genuine choice, honestly framed, demands a decision.
4. Size and convene the board for the decision. A body of eleven that meets monthly regardless of need is built for assurance. A smaller core that can genuinely deliberate, convened when a decision is ripe rather than only when the calendar turns, is built to decide. Assurance can be served in parallel – the wider stakeholder group, the compliance evidence, the regular reporting all have their place – but they should not be permitted to colonise the body whose one job is to choose.

The contrast, drawn sharply, looks like this:

Dimension	The Status Meeting	The Deciding Board
First page of the pack	RAG summary by workstream	The decisions to be made this period
Dominant verb	Note	Decide
What arrives on a problem	A colour and a chosen recovery plan	The situation and its real options
Basis for engagement	The calendar	A ripe decision, or a tolerance breached
Measure of a good meeting	It finished on time	Something was decided that changed the programme
What the board governs	The reported past	The choosable future

None of this is exotic. Every element of it exists already in the methods most of our programmes claim to follow. The concepts of tolerance, of exception reporting, of the sponsor as a genuine decision-maker rather than a committee chair, are not novelties – they are, for the most part, being quietly ignored while their surrounding paperwork is scrupulously observed. We have kept the reports and mislaid the decisions. The recovery is less a matter of new machinery than of remembering what the existing machinery was for.

8. The Decision Deficit

Step back from the meeting room, and the drift of the programme board turns out to be a small, visible instance of a larger and more troubling pattern. We have become, as a discipline, remarkably fluent in the apparatus of transformation — the plans, the stage gates, the registers, the reporting cadences, the governance structures with their carefully drawn terms of reference — and remarkably less fluent in the thing all of that apparatus exists to serve, which is the making of good decisions at the right moment. The gap between what our transformations intend and what they achieve is not, for the most part, a gap in method. It is a gap in decision.

“We have built elaborate machinery for producing the appearance of governance, and then wondered why so little seems to be governed.”

This is what the status meeting reveals when we look at it closely. A programme board that has become a status meeting is not merely an inefficient use of senior time. It is a place where decisions were supposed to be made and are not being made — a decision deficit given a room, a calendar slot and an agenda. The programme continues, of course; programmes always continue. But direction, the thing the board exists to hold, has quietly left the building. It has migrated into the sponsor's private judgement, into corridor conversations, into the accumulating weight of choices deferred until they make themselves. The board meets, and governs the past, while the future is decided elsewhere or not at all.

The remedy is not more governance. Few phrases have done more damage to a struggling programme than the well-meant instruction to “strengthen the governance,” which in practice almost always means more boards, more reports, more meetings — more status. The remedy is less status and more decision: fewer people meeting less often, but meeting to choose rather than to be told; packs that open with questions rather than colours; sponsors who understand that their role is to decide the hard things early, when deciding is still cheap, rather than to preside over the reporting of hard things once they have grown undeniable.

A board earns its place in an organisation not by the diligence of its oversight but by the quality of the decisions it makes and the timeliness with which it makes them. That is the standard worth holding our governing bodies to. The question to ask of any programme board is not whether it met, nor whether it was well informed, nor even whether it finished on time. The question is simpler, and far more searching: when did it last decide something that changed the programme's course — and if it cannot remember, what, precisely, has it been for?