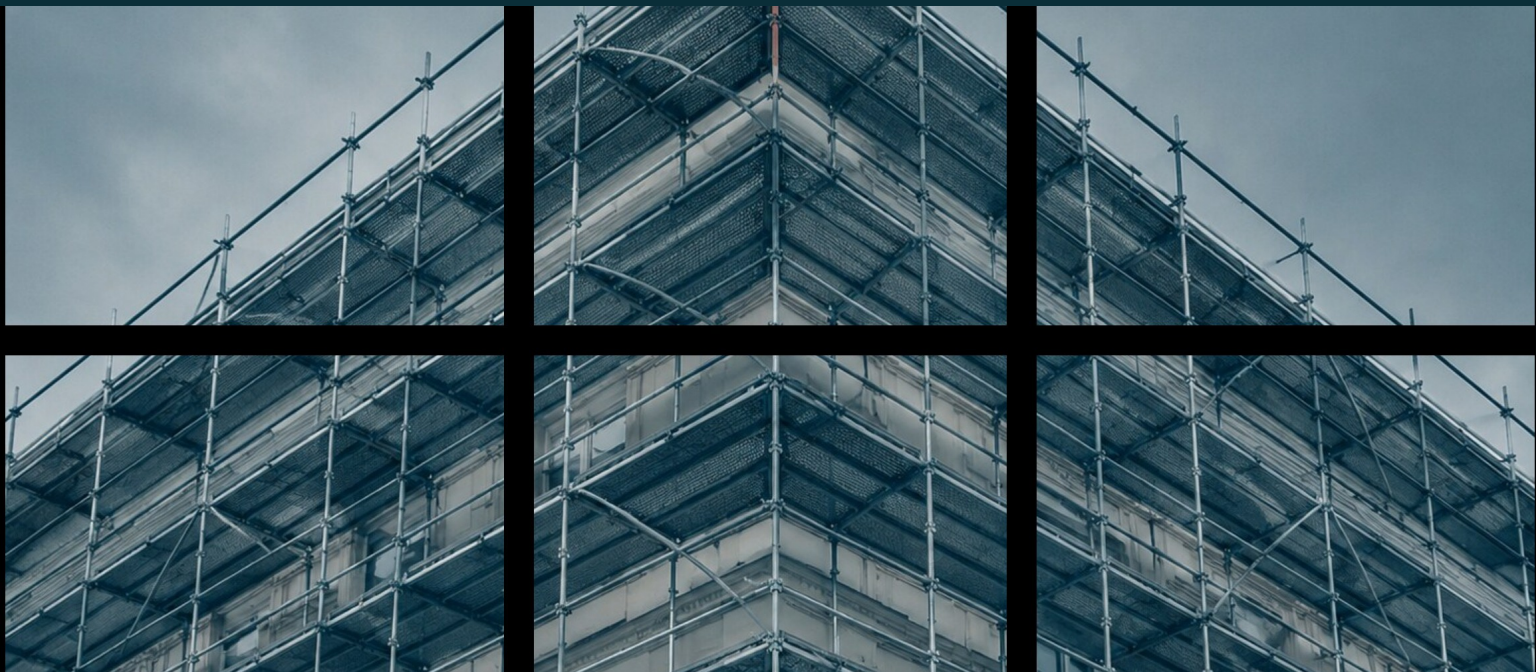


BEYOND THE BRAKE

Governance as Accelerator: What Oversight Looks Like When It Actually Helps

Why the transformation programmes that move fastest are often the most heavily governed
— and what that inversion should teach us.



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Contents

1. Executive Summary	3
2. The board that could decide	3
3. Why we only study the wreckage	4
4. Governance as a decision engine	4
5. Why the reporting reflex will not die	5
6. The strongest objection	6
7. The anatomy of enabling oversight	7
8. Why the pattern sustains itself	7
9. Coda	8

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“Speed builds trust; trust permits speed.”

1. Executive Summary

Almost everything written about programme governance is written about its failures. We have a rich literature on the steering committee that meets fortnightly and decides nothing, on the status report that stays green until the week the programme is cancelled, on the assurance regime that documents a disaster in immaculate detail. We have almost nothing on the opposite specimen: governance that works, experienced by the people inside a programme not as a tax on their time but as the thing that lets them move.

This essay turns the telescope around. The claim it defends is simple and, I suspect, unwelcome. The transformation programmes that move fastest are frequently the most heavily governed. The variable that matters is not how much governance a programme carries but what that governance is for. Where oversight exists to reassure the people above the programme, it slows everything beneath it. Where it exists to make the decisions the programme cannot make for itself, it accelerates. That is the whole distinction, and organisations spend fortunes on the machinery of the first kind while rarely building the second.

The essay does three things. It examines what enabling governance actually looks like when you are standing inside it, and shows the mechanism by which it speeds delivery up rather than slowing it down. It asks why the reporting reflex — governance as reassurance — is so structurally durable, given how reliably it disappoints. And it takes seriously the strongest objection to the whole argument: that in the world we now inhabit, after Enron and WorldCom and the codes and controls written in their wake, governance that enables is simply governance that has gone soft.

2. The board that could decide

I want to begin with two rooms, because the difference between them is the entire subject.

In the first, a programme board of eleven people meets on the last Thursday of the month. The pack runs to sixty pages and is circulated the evening before, which means nobody has read it. The programme director talks for forty minutes. There is a RAG-rated milestone tracker, a risk register with fifty-one open items, and a finance annexe. A supplier's scope change — the one thing on which the next quarter genuinely depends — sits at item nine on the agenda and is reached at ten past five, when three members have already left for trains. It is "noted", and "an options paper is requested for the next meeting". The next meeting is in five weeks.

In the second room, six people meet weekly for forty-five minutes and there is no pack, only a single page that arrived that morning listing the decisions the programme needs and cannot take alone. The scope change is the second item. The person who owns the affected budget is in the room. The person who understands the technical dependency is in the room. There is a short, sometimes sharp exchange, an objection is raised and answered, and a decision is made and minuted before the meeting moves on. Elapsed time from the change being identified to the change being authorised: nine days, most of which was the drafting.

The first board is doing governance to the programme. The second is doing governance for it. Both would appear, on an organisation chart, to be the same control. Only one of them is worth the diaries it consumes.

The question to ask of any governance body is not "what does it review?" but "what can it decide, and how quickly?" A body that can only review is not a governance mechanism. It is an audience.

3. Why we only study the wreckage

There is a reason our collective wisdom about governance is so lopsided towards failure, and it is worth naming, because it distorts what we build.

Failure is legible. When a programme collapses, there is an inquiry, a lessons-learned exercise, a post-implementation review, sometimes — in the regulated sectors — a report that reaches a board or a regulator. The governance is dissected precisely because it did not work. Success is mute. When a programme lands on time and the benefits materialise, no one convenes a panel to ask why the steering committee was so effective. The governance that helped is invisible, folded into the general impression that "it was a well-run programme", as though that were an accident of temperament rather than a designed thing.

The consequence is a survivorship problem in reverse. We study the crashes and infer the rules of flight from them, and the rules we infer are almost all prohibitions: more assurance, tighter reporting, more frequent review, more independent scrutiny, more documented sign-off. Every one of these is a defensible response to a specific failure. Collectively they describe a machine for not being blamed, and a machine for not being blamed is not the same machine as one for delivering. Sometimes it is the opposite machine.

I have watched capable organisations respond to a single bad programme by adding a layer of oversight to every programme, and I have watched the throughput of all of them fall as a result. The failure was real and the response was rational and the net effect was to make the next twenty programmes slower in order to feel safer about the twenty-first. This is the reporting reflex in its purest form: the honest belief that if we had only seen the disaster coming we could have stopped it, and therefore that more visibility is always worth its price. It rarely is, because the disaster is almost never a failure of visibility. It is a failure of decision.

4. Governance as a decision engine

Here is the mechanism, stated plainly. A transformation programme is a machine for taking a very large number of decisions under uncertainty and time pressure. Most of those decisions can and must be taken by the people doing the work. But a programme of any scale continually throws up a particular class of decision that the delivery teams cannot take alone: a decision that crosses a boundary they do not own — another department's budget, a shared platform, a policy, a supplier contract, a trade-off between two directorates who each believe they are the priority. These are the decisions that pile up. And when they pile up, everything behind them stops.

Enabling governance is the mechanism that clears this queue at the speed the programme is generating it. That is its entire function. It is not there to check the programme's homework; it is there to be the place where the cross-cutting decision gets made, by the people who have the authority to make it, fast enough that the delivery teams never idle waiting for an answer.

The cost of not having this is measurable, and worth measuring, because the reporting reflex survives partly on the belief that governance is a pure overhead. Take a modestly sized delivery — an integration team of thirty, a mix of permanent staff and contractors, at a blended cost of the order of six hundred pounds a day. That is roughly £18,000 a day the organisation is paying to have that team move forward. Now insert a single cross-boundary decision — a scope change that needs another director's sign-off — into a governance model whose next decision point is five weeks away. If that decision gates even a third of the team's work, the organisation has purchased something in the region of £120,000 of half-idle capacity while it waits for a meeting to reach item nine. Do this four or five times across the life of the programme, which is entirely ordinary, and the "overhead" of slow governance has quietly consumed more than the cost of the governance function several times over — and none of it appears in any budget line, because idle time never does.

“Slow governance does not show up as a cost. It shows up as a schedule that keeps slipping for reasons no one can quite name.”

The enabling board attacks exactly this figure. By meeting weekly rather than monthly, by carrying an agenda of decisions required rather than progress to report, and by seating the people who actually hold the relevant authority, it collapses the five-week wait to a nine-day one — and most of the nine days is the honest work of framing the choice, not queuing for a slot. The programme moves at the speed of its decisions, and the decisions move at the speed of the room that owns them.

5. Why the reporting reflex will not die

If the enabling pattern is so obviously superior on delivery, the interesting question is why it is so rare, and why the reporting pattern is so tenacious. The answer is that the reporting reflex is sustained by structural forces that have nothing to do with delivery and everything to do with the anxieties of the people above the programme.

- The first force is accountability without proximity. A director is accountable for a programme they cannot see into. The status pack is the instrument that lets them

feel accountable at a distance — it converts their anxiety into a document. The pack is not really for the programme; it is for the director's own sense of control, and it will therefore grow to whatever size the anxiety demands, regardless of whether anyone reads it.

- The second is the compliance climate of the moment. We are governing in the long shadow of the corporate scandals earlier this decade. The Combined Code, the Turnbull guidance on internal control, and — for anyone touched by a United States listing — the documentation demands of Sarbanes-Oxley have together made evidence of oversight a thing of value in itself. A programme that produces a thick, auditable trail of review feels safer to a board than one that produces good decisions quietly, even when the second delivers and the first does not. We have made a virtue of the visible artefact of control.
- The third is blame pre-positioning. In an organisation where a failed programme ends careers, oversight becomes insurance. The reporting board exists so that afterwards it can be said that the matter was escalated, the risk was on the register, the concern was minuted. Every one of those sentences is a defence built in advance. None of them moves the programme an inch, and everyone in the room knows it, and they build the defence anyway because the incentive to do so is entirely real.

These forces are not foolish. They are responses to genuine features of organisational life — distance, regulation, blame. That is exactly why the reporting reflex is so hard to dislodge. It is not a mistake anyone is making; it is a rational response to the wrong question. The question the reporting board answers is "how do we feel appropriately in control of this?" The question the enabling board answers is "how do we get this decided?" The tragedy is that only the second question, answered well, actually produces the control that the first one is anxiously chasing.

6. The strongest objection

I promised to take the hardest version of the counter-argument seriously, and it deserves to be stated at full strength, because a great deal of thoughtful practice stands behind it.

The objection runs like this. Governance is control, and control exists precisely to constrain the enthusiasm of the people doing the work. Programme teams are optimists by selection; left to themselves they will always argue for speed over scrutiny, because speed is what they are rewarded for. The discipline of reporting, the independence of assurance, the friction of formal sign-off — these are not bugs, they are the mechanism by which an organisation protects itself, its shareholders and, in regulated sectors, its customers from the enthusiasm of its own delivery teams. After the accounting scandals that gave us the current wave of governance codes, we know exactly what happens when oversight is captured by the people it is meant to oversee. "Governance that enables" is a comfortable phrase, but it can very easily describe governance that has stopped saying no. A board that meets the delivery team weekly and shares its urgency has arguably crossed the line from overseeing the programme to being part of it — and who, then, is left to apply the brake?

This is a serious argument and it is right about one thing absolutely: independence matters, and a governance body that has been fully absorbed into the programme's optimism has ceased to govern. But the objection contains a hidden and false equation, which is that friction is control — that the slowness and the scrutiny are the same thing, so that reducing the first necessarily weakens the second.

They are not the same thing. The enabling board I have described says no constantly; it simply says no fast, and about the right things. Its independence lives not in the length of its cycle but in the clarity of the authority in the room and its willingness to use it. A weekly board with the budget-holder present who kills a scope change on the spot has exercised more real control than a monthly board that "notes" the same change and requests a paper. Friction is not the guarantor of control; it is very often the absence of control dressed up as diligence, because a body that reviews without deciding has not constrained anything at all — it has merely watched. The genuine insight buried in the objection is about independence, and enabling governance keeps it. What it discards is the mistaken belief that oversight must be slow in order to be real.

7. The anatomy of enabling oversight

If we strip the enabling pattern down to its structural features — the things that make the second room work and the first room fail — a short and demanding list remains. None of it is exotic. All of it is hard, because each item asks someone senior to give something up.

Feature	Reporting reflex	Enabling pattern
Purpose of the meeting	To review progress and be reassured	To take the decisions the programme cannot take alone
Cadence	Set by the calendar (monthly)	Set by the programme's decision velocity (often weekly)
The pack	Comprehensive, retrospective, unread	One page of decisions required, forward-looking
Membership	By seniority and representation	By the authority relevant to the decisions in play
The default posture	Note, request a paper, defer	Decide, or explicitly delegate the decision with a deadline
Where independence lives	In the distance from the team	In the willingness to say no quickly and mean it

The membership line is the one that does the most work and meets the most resistance. A reporting board is populated by rank — the most senior person from each affected area, whether or not they hold the decision the programme needs. An enabling board is populated by decision rights — the person who can actually release the budget, change the policy, or move the resource, even when that person is two levels down from the usual attendee. Reconstituting a board around who can decide rather than who is senior enough to attend is, in most organisations, a small act of insurrection, and it is precisely the act that separates the two rooms.

8. Why the pattern sustains itself

The question this essay was set asks not only what enabling governance looks like but why the pattern persists where it takes root. It is a good question, because most good governance is fragile — it decays back towards the reporting reflex the moment attention

moves on. The enabling pattern is one of the few that, once genuinely established, tends to hold. The reason is worth stating, because it is the most hopeful thing here.

Enabling governance is self-reinforcing through trust. When a board decides quickly and its decisions turn out to be sound, three things happen. The delivery teams stop routing around it — they bring their genuine cross-boundary problems to it rather than hiding them, because the board has proven it will help rather than punish. The senior members, seeing decisions land well, become willing to delegate more and attend less anxiously, which keeps the cadence fast. And the organisation above begins to trust the programme's own status, because the decisions are visibly being taken, which removes the very anxiety that generated the sixty-page pack in the first place. Speed builds trust; trust permits speed. The loop, once turning, resists being slowed.

The reporting reflex has the opposite dynamic and it is why it decays even faster than it deserves to. Slow decisions produce slipping schedules; slipping schedules produce anxiety above; anxiety produces demands for more reporting; more reporting slows decisions further. The two patterns are both self-reinforcing, and an organisation is almost always somewhere on one of the two spirals. The rarity of enabling governance is not because it is unstable — it is stable once reached. It is rare because reaching it requires a senior group to do the one thing seniority most dislikes: to hold authority in a room and spend it in real time, in front of witnesses, at the speed the work demands, rather than storing it up behind a monthly pack. Most never make that trade. The few who do rarely go back.

9. Coda

We will go on studying the wreckage, because the wreckage is what leaves a report. But the practitioners who have stood in both rooms know that the difference between them was never the volume of oversight. It was whether the oversight was there to watch the programme or to move it. The programmes that ran fastest in my experience were not the ones that had escaped governance. They were the ones whose governance had, quietly and against the grain of every structural incentive, decided that its job was to decide. That is not a lighter form of control. It is the only form that was ever really in control at all.