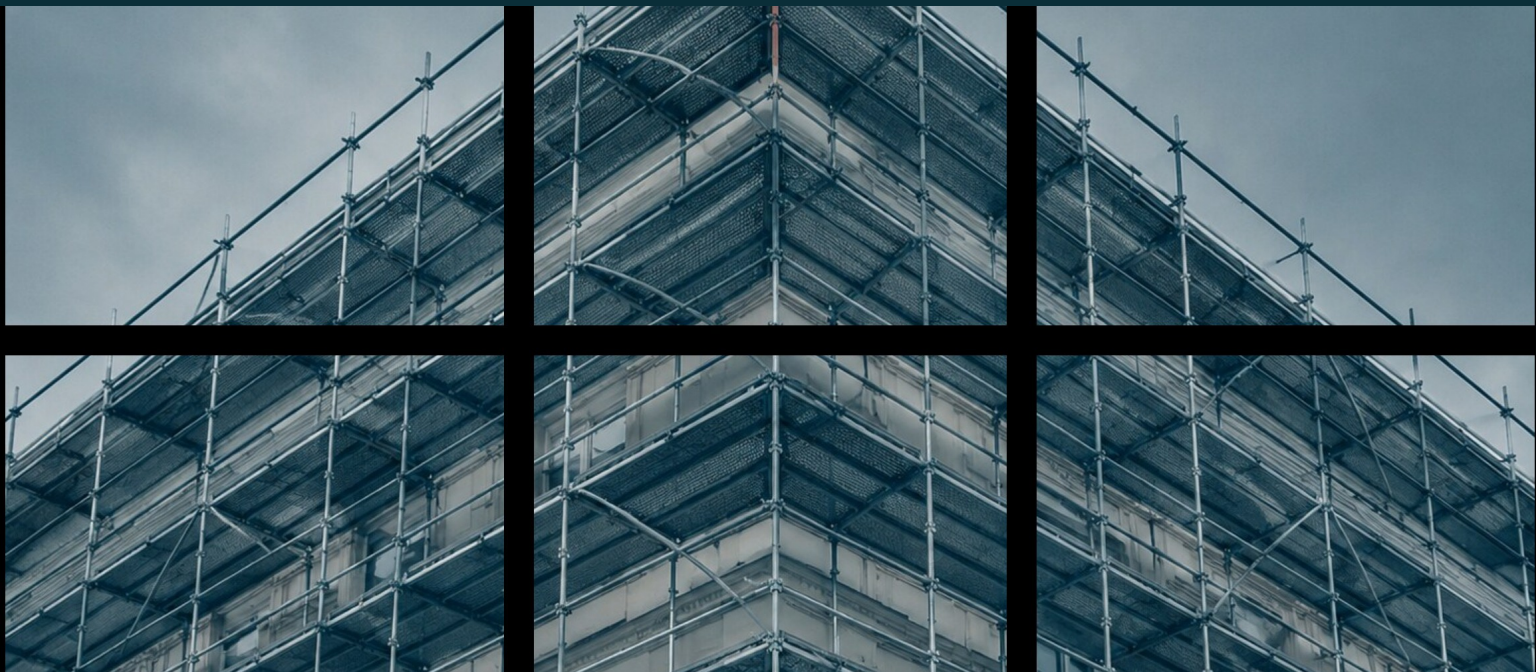


BEYOND COMPLIANCE THEATRE

Governance as Enabler — What It Actually Looks Like When It Works

A Practitioner's Perspective on Productive Governance in Complex Organisations



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1. The Enabling Governance Paradox

There is a peculiar irony in the way most organisations talk about governance. They want it to be an enabler. They say so in their programme mandates, in their operating model designs, in the terms of reference for every board and steering committee they establish. And yet, when you sit in the room, what you observe is something quite different: governance as a reporting ritual, a compliance exercise, a mechanism for distributing blame in the event of failure.

The gap between aspiration and reality is not, in my experience, a gap of intent. The people who design these structures genuinely want them to work. The gap is structural. It sits in the way we constitute governance forums, in the information we put before them, and in the authority we give — or withhold from — the people who sit around the table.

2. What Enabling Governance Is Not

Before describing what works, it is worth being precise about what does not. There is a persistent misconception that enabling governance means lighter governance — fewer meetings, shorter papers, less scrutiny. This is a dangerous simplification. The organisations I have seen dismantle governance in the name of agility have not become more agile; they have become more chaotic. Decisions that were previously made badly in a committee are now not made at all, or made by whoever happens to be in the corridor at the right moment.

Enabling governance is not the absence of control. It is the presence of the right kind of control, applied at the right level, by people with the right authority and information.

Equally, enabling governance is not governance that always says yes. A board that rubber-stamps every request is not enabling anything — it is abdicating. The organisations where governance genuinely enables are the ones where the forum is capable of saying no early and clearly, so that effort is not wasted on work that was never going to be sanctioned. A clear no in week three is worth more than a qualified yes in month six.

3. The Three Conditions

Across the programmes and organisations where I have seen governance function as a genuine enabler rather than an overhead, three conditions have been consistently present. None of them is about the framework. All of them are about the operating reality of the forum.

3.1 Decision rights that are real

The single most common failure in programme governance is the committee that can discuss but not decide. The steering group that must refer upward. The board that can recommend but not approve. In every case, the effect is the same: the forum becomes a way-station rather than a destination. Papers circulate, views are exchanged, and the decision migrates to an informal conversation between two senior individuals after the meeting.

In the organisations where governance enables, the terms of reference are not a polite fiction. The people in the room have genuine delegated authority for the decisions the forum exists to make. This sounds obvious. It is remarkably rare.

The most reliable indicator of whether a governance forum enables or obstructs is a simple one: does the meeting end with decisions, or with actions to seek decisions elsewhere?

The practical test is straightforward. Look at the action log from the last six meetings. If the dominant pattern is "escalate to..." or "seek approval from...", the forum does not have real decision rights, regardless of what its terms of reference claim.

3.2 Information that supports decision-making, not reporting

The second condition is the quality and shape of the information that reaches the forum. In most programme governance, what arrives is a status report: RAG ratings, milestone trackers, risk registers presented as inventories. This information tells you what has happened. It does not tell you what to do.

Enabling governance requires information designed for decision-making. That means:

- Papers that frame a specific decision, not a general update
- Options presented with genuine trade-offs, not a preferred recommendation dressed as a choice
- Financial and schedule data presented in terms of remaining contingency and decision points, not cumulative spend against baseline
- Risk information that identifies the decisions the board needs to take, not merely the risks it needs to be aware of

The shift from reporting-oriented to decision-oriented information is not a formatting exercise. It requires a fundamentally different relationship between the programme team and the governance forum. The programme team must trust the board enough to present genuine uncertainty, and the board must be mature enough to engage with it rather than treating uncertainty as evidence of poor management.

3.3 Rhythm that matches the pace of the work

The third condition is less obvious but equally important. Governance forums that enable have a rhythm — a meeting cadence, a decision cycle — that matches the pace of the work

they govern. A monthly board governing a programme with fortnightly delivery cycles will always be out of phase. Decisions that need to be made in week two wait until week four. By the time they are made, the context has changed and the decision is either irrelevant or wrong.

This does not mean governance must be frequent. It means governance must be matched. A quarterly portfolio review governing annual investment decisions may be entirely appropriate. A monthly steering group governing a rapid implementation is almost certainly too slow.

The pattern I have observed is that organisations tend to set governance cadence based on the seniority of the attendees — the more senior the forum, the less frequently it meets — rather than on the pace of the decisions it needs to make. This is precisely backwards. The cadence should follow the work, and the membership should follow the cadence, not the other way around.

4. The Role of the Chair

No discussion of enabling governance is complete without addressing the chair. In my experience, the single greatest variable in whether a governance forum enables or obstructs is the behaviour of the person who chairs it.

An enabling chair does three things consistently:

1. They ensure the agenda is structured around decisions, not updates. Status reporting is pushed to pre-reading; meeting time is reserved for the items that require the forum's collective judgement.
2. They actively manage the room. They draw out dissent rather than seeking consensus too early. They name the decision that needs to be made, and they confirm it before moving on.
3. They hold the boundary between governance and management. They do not allow the forum to redesign the solution, re-plan the schedule, or second-guess operational decisions that belong to the programme team.

The third point is perhaps the most critical and the most frequently violated. The line between governance and management is not always easy to hold, particularly when senior leaders have strong views about how the work should be done. But when a governance forum crosses that line, it ceases to enable and begins to obstruct — not because its views are wrong, but because it introduces a decision-making layer that the programme's own management structure is not designed to accommodate.

5. Why This Matters Now

The current landscape of large-scale organisational change — regulatory programmes, technology-enabled transformation, post-merger integration — demands governance that can keep pace with complexity without adding to it. The frameworks we have are broadly adequate. PRINCE2, MSP, the OGC's guidance on programme and portfolio governance — all of these provide a reasonable skeleton. What they cannot provide is the operating culture that makes the skeleton move.

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Enabling governance is, in the end, a design challenge. It asks us to design forums where the right people, with the right information, at the right cadence, make decisions that they have the genuine authority to make. It is not a matter of adopting a lighter framework or a heavier one. It is a matter of being honest about whether the forums we have created are fit for the purpose we claim for them.

In my experience, most are not. But the ones that are — the organisations that have cracked this — are visibly, measurably different in their ability to move complex work forward. Not because they have fewer controls, but because their controls are designed to produce decisions, not reports.