

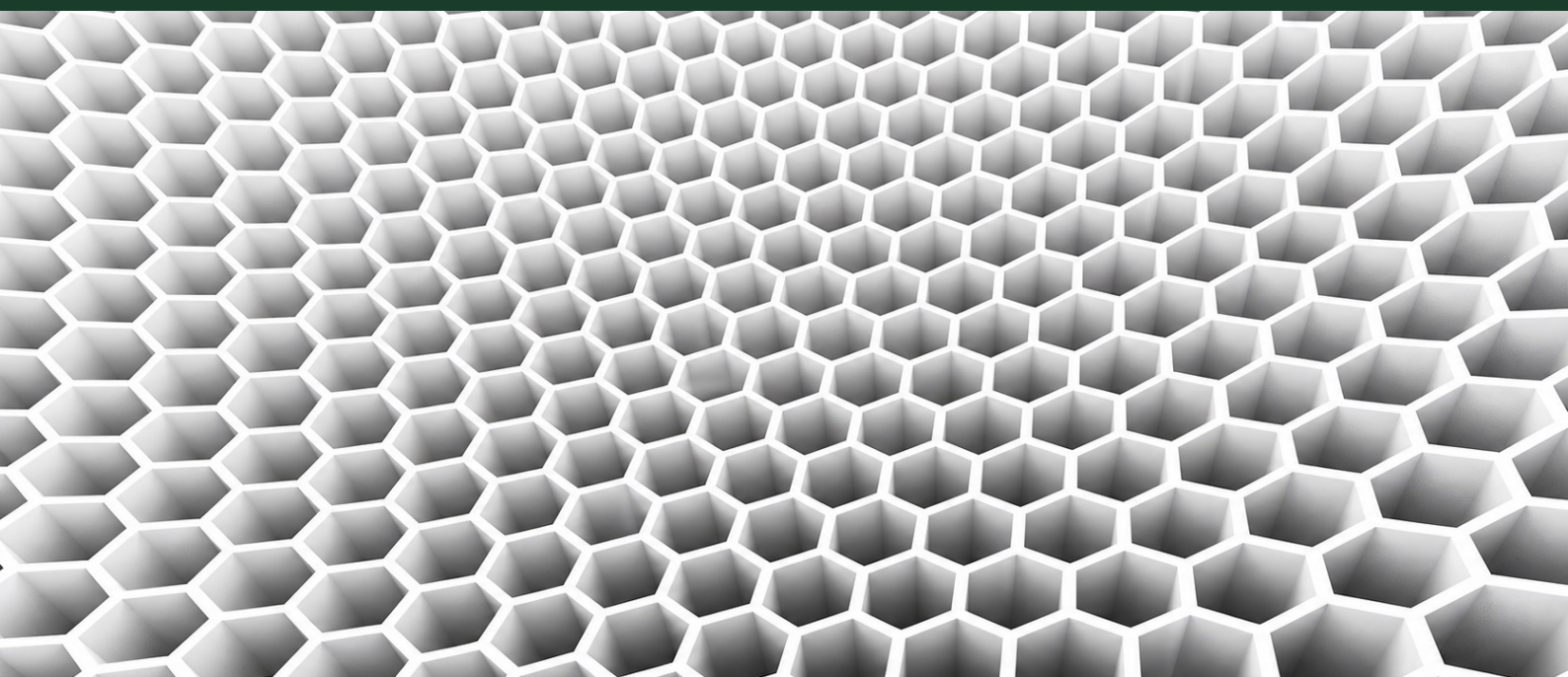
BEYOND VIRTUAL CEREMONY

Governance in Pyjamas: Virtual Programme Boards Exposed Which Decisions Never Needed a Room

What the sudden move online revealed about ceremony, challenge and accountable authority

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“A board cannot rely on the room when there is no room.”

The Board Meeting That Lost Its Furniture

At 09:00, twelve faces appeared in twelve rectangles. The programme director had no mahogany table to read, no whispered exchange with the sponsor and no stack of printed papers to signal seriousness. Two members were dealing with poor connections. One had a child pass behind the camera. The chair opened with a question that had rarely arrived so early in the old room: what must we decide today?

That question is the real story of programme boards going virtual in 2020.

The obvious commentary has focused on etiquette: cameras on or off, backgrounds, interruptions, shorter agendas and the indignity of formal governance conducted from spare rooms. The consequential change is elsewhere. Virtual meetings have removed many of the physical cues that allowed governance to resemble authority without exercising it.

A board cannot rely on the room when there is no room.

Ceremony Was Carrying More Weight Than We Admitted

In person, a programme board could feel substantial even when it did little. Attendance by senior people, a thick pack and a formal sequence created the appearance of control. The programme team presented. Functions commented. Actions were recorded. Difficult decisions were deferred until somebody produced more analysis.

On screen, the same pattern becomes intolerable. A ninety-minute recitation of status is visibly a poor use of twelve dispersed people. Participants read email, disappear behind muted microphones and contribute only when named. The technology has not caused weak governance. It has made weak governance harder to disguise.

The most effective virtual boards I have observed during the present disruption have become smaller, shorter and more explicit. A composite example is typical. A programme

responsible for moving 8,000 employees away from normal sites reduced a 76-page fortnightly pack to six pages:

- The operational outcome and current evidence
- Three decisions required
- Five exceptions operating outside normal control
- Capacity and supplier constraints
- Risks that could change the next two weeks
- Named actions from the previous meeting

The board moved from two hours every fortnight to 45 minutes twice a week. Attendance fell from eighteen to nine, while the necessary specialists joined for the decision that needed them. Average decision age dropped from seventeen days to four.

Nothing about a video call created that improvement. The loss of the room forced the chair to design for decisions.

Virtual governance works when the meeting stops being the place where information is presented and becomes the point where authority is exercised.

The Informal Channel Has Not Vanished — It Has Become Unequal

There is a serious objection to celebrating virtual boards. Physical meetings carry information that agendas do not. A sponsor notices hesitation. Two functions resolve a misunderstanding before the meeting begins. A new programme manager learns which concern is genuine and which is ritual. Trust accumulates through unplanned contact.

Virtual working does not remove informal influence; it redistributes it into private calls and messages. Those already inside the relationship network retain context. Newer, quieter or more distant participants may receive only the formal meeting. A board can therefore become faster while becoming less inclusive and less able to detect weak signals.

This matters because programme governance depends on challenge. If disagreement migrates into private conversations, the recorded meeting may show consensus that was never properly tested.

The answer is not to recreate the old meeting online. It is to make the missing work deliberate:

- Circulate the decision question, not merely the pack.
- Ask each mandatory adviser for a clear judgement before the meeting.
- Record dissent and conditions, not only the final resolution.
- Give new or affected participants a short route to the chair.
- Separate information sessions from decision sessions.
- Use occasional one-to-one conversations to surface what the screen suppresses.

These disciplines were always good practice. Distance has made their absence visible.

A Camera Is Not Accountability

Some boards are now confusing presence with participation. They insist on cameras, monitor attendance and reproduce every standing agenda item. This is governance by observable behaviour. It may reassure the chair, but it does not answer whether authority was used well.

A virtual board should be judged by a more demanding set of questions:

1. Was the decision stated clearly?
2. Was the accountable person present?
3. Was the necessary advice available at the point of decision?
4. Were options and consequences genuinely considered?
5. Was the decision recorded with conditions, owner and review trigger?
6. Did the programme act, and did the evidence change?

If the answer to those questions is yes, it is irrelevant whether every participant looked attentive for the whole call. If the answer is no, compulsory cameras will not repair the governance.

Do Not Put the Furniture Back Unchanged

When people can safely return to shared rooms, many organisations will treat virtual boards as an awkward interim arrangement. They will restore printed packs, broad attendance and monthly ceremony because those practices look like normal control.

That would waste the evidence of 2020.

The proper lesson is not that every board should remain virtual. Some decisions benefit from sustained discussion, visible disagreement and the trust of physical presence. The lesson is that the meeting format must follow the decision.

Use a short virtual session for bounded choices with prepared evidence. Convene a longer workshop when the problem itself is unsettled. Bring people together physically when relationships, negotiation or collective sense-making are the work. Do not use any format as a default badge of seriousness.

Programme boards have spent years asking teams to transform while leaving governance itself untouched. The sudden move online has exposed how much of the old model depended on furniture, proximity and ritual.

We should not be embarrassed by governance in pyjamas. We should be embarrassed if, after seeing decisions made without the ceremony, we restore the ceremony without asking what it was for.