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Essay

BEYOND THE STATUS PACK

Governing Without Deciding: How the Programme Board Became a Status Meeting

How boards built to choose became bodies that merely receive — and the decision deficit that follows

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“Deciding by drift feels like not deciding, which is exactly why it is so common and so expensive”

1. Executive Summary

Somewhere in the life of most large programmes, the body created to govern it quietly stops governing. The programme board still meets. The diaries are still blocked, the pack is still circulated the night before, the senior people still assemble around the table. But the meeting has changed its nature without anyone deciding that it should. It has become a place where the state of the programme is described rather than a place where the course of the programme is set. The board receives; it no longer chooses.

This essay is an attempt to understand why that happens, because it happens too consistently to be an accident of personality or a failure of any one chairman. The drift from decision to status is structural. It is produced by the reporting apparatus we have built with such care over the past decade, by a governance climate that now prizes assurance above almost everything, and by the simple, human fact that receiving an update carries no accountability while making a decision carries a great deal. A status meeting is safe. A decision meeting is exposed. Left to themselves, most boards migrate toward safety.

The consequence is a decision deficit at the very top of the programme. The choices that a board exists to make — to stop a failing workstream, to resolve a contest between two initiatives for the same scarce people, to change the scope when the business case has moved — do not disappear when the board declines to make them. They migrate. They are made in corridors, or by the programme director alone and unsupported, or they are made by default through the passage of time, which is the most expensive way to decide anything. The board becomes an audience for a play whose ending has already been written elsewhere.

> *A board that only receives status has not governed cautiously. It has abdicated, and dressed the abdication in the vocabulary of oversight.*

What follows traces the intent the board was built to serve, the mechanics by which deciding turned into reporting, the deeper forces that hold the pattern in place, and the honest counter-argument that status is itself a legitimate function of governance. It closes with what it takes to reclaim the room — not by abolishing reporting, but by refusing to let reporting consume the scarce and uncomfortable act of choosing.

2. The Meeting That Decided Nothing

Consider a scene that will be familiar to anyone who has sat on the delivery side of a major change programme. It is the monthly programme board. Fourteen people are present, some of them for the first time, several of them dialled in. The pack ran to sixty pages this month, up from a dozen when the programme began; it arrived at nine the previous evening, and perhaps three people have read it in full. The Senior Responsible Owner opens the meeting and, because the pack is the meeting, begins to walk the room through it.

The delivery director narrates the highlight report. The workstream leads take their turns. The dashboard is projected, and attention settles on the amber and red items in the way that attention always settles on the reds — with a shared, slightly performative concern that produces sympathy but rarely resolution. Someone asks a clarifying question. Someone else offers reassurance that a recovery plan is in hand. The programme's two largest workstreams are, as everyone in the room quietly knows, competing for the same small integration team, and one of them will have to give way. This is the decision the board exists to make. It is raised, briefly, under a slide near the back. It is agreed that it should be "taken offline". The meeting closes on time. Everyone leaves with the comfortable sense of having been diligent.

Nothing was decided. A great deal was described. And the one genuine choice on the table — the choice that only this group had the authority and the sightline to make — was deferred to a conversation that will happen, if it happens at all, between two of the attendees in a corridor, with none of the others present and none of the record that a board provides.

I have sat in that meeting more times than I would like to count, and the striking thing is how well-run it usually is. The failure is not incompetence. The chairing is often excellent, the reporting is professional, the discipline of the highlight report is exactly what the manuals ask for. The meeting fails at the level of purpose while succeeding at the level of process, and that combination is precisely what makes the failure so hard to see from inside it.

3. What the Board Was Built to Do

It is worth returning to what a programme board is supposed to be, because the gap between the design and the room is the whole of the argument. The guidance that governs our profession is not vague on this point. Managing Successful Programmes is explicit that the sponsoring group and the board exist to own the business case and to direct the programme — to make the investment decisions, to hold the vision, to intervene when the programme drifts from the benefits it was chartered to deliver. PRINCE2, at the project tier beneath, is built on the principle of managing by exception: the board sets tolerances and is troubled only when those tolerances are threatened, precisely so that its scarce attention is reserved for decisions rather than spent on narration. The OGC Gateway process exists to provide independent assurance at the critical decision points, so that the board is not the only line of defence and does not have to manufacture confidence out of a status pack.

The design, in other words, is coherent and it is old. A programme board is a decision-making engine. It owns the money and the mandate. It is the body that can do the things no workstream lead can do: kill an initiative, move the funding, resolve the cross-programme contention, change the scope when the world has changed. Its authority is its whole reason for existing. A board that cannot or will not exercise that authority is not a lighter-touch board. It is a different object altogether, wearing the same name.

> *"A programme board is a decision-making engine that owns the money and the mandate. Strip out the deciding and what remains is not governance travelling light; it is theatre."*

The manuals assume the deciding. They do not, on the whole, tell you how to protect it, because when they were written the danger was under-governance — programmes running unsupervised, sponsors who signed the charter and vanished. The professionalisation of the last ten years has largely cured that disease. Programmes are now governed intensively. The new disease is the one the manuals did not anticipate: governance so dense with reporting that the deciding is crowded out of its own meeting.

4. How Deciding Became Reporting

The mechanism is not mysterious, and it is worth setting out plainly, because it is the reporting apparatus itself — the thing we are most proud of — that does the crowding.

When a programme is young, the board meeting is mostly conversation. There is not yet much to report, so the time is spent on the substance: what are we trying to do, what is in the way, what shall we do about it. As the programme matures, the reporting machinery matures with it. A highlight report is introduced, then standardised. A RAG dashboard appears and, being useful, expands. Milestone trackers, risk registers, benefit-realisation curves, dependency maps, financial actuals against forecast — each is added for a good reason, and each consumes a slice of the agenda. Within a year the pack has quadrupled and the meeting has reorganised itself around the consumption of the pack. The board now spends its hour being walked through the state of the world, and the hour is gone before the first genuine choice is reached.

The tragedy is that every step in this progression is defensible. Nobody ever proposed that the board should stop deciding. What was proposed, repeatedly and reasonably, was that the board should be better informed — and being better informed turned out to be a substitute for deciding rather than a preparation for it. The information expanded to fill the room, and the appetite for information is effectively infinite, because there is always one more cut of the data that might make the decision feel safer to take. So the decision is postponed in favour of more analysis, and the analysis becomes next month's status, and the pattern sets.

There is a subtler mechanism working underneath the obvious one. Status is legible and decisions are not. A RAG status can be produced, formatted, and presented; it looks like progress and it fills a slide. A decision, by contrast, is uncomfortable to stage. It requires someone to say that a thing should stop, or that a favoured initiative should give way, in front of the person who sponsors that thing. Faced with a choice between an hour of legible, presentable, blameless reporting and ten minutes of exposed and contested decision-making, a room of intelligent and busy people will drift, every time, toward the reporting. Not from cowardice. From the ordinary gravitational pull of the path that asks less of everyone.

5. The Forces Beneath the Ritual

If this were only a matter of overgrown packs it could be fixed with a page limit. It is not, and the reason it is not is that several powerful forces converge to hold the status meeting in place. It is worth naming them, because each has to be addressed on its own terms.

- The assurance climate. We are governing in the long shadow of Enron and WorldCom, and of the regulatory response they provoked. Sarbanes-Oxley reshaped what boards of all kinds understand themselves to be for; the emphasis on internal control, documented oversight, and demonstrable assurance has flowed downhill into every governance body in the enterprise, including programme boards. Add to this the compliance-driven mega-programmes many of us are now running — the Basel II implementations, the regulatory remediations — and you have an environment in which being able to show that you were watching has become the dominant instinct of governance. A status pack is an artefact of watching. A decision is an act of ownership. The climate rewards the former far more reliably than the latter.

- The asymmetry of accountability. To decide is to become answerable for the outcome. To receive a report is to be, at worst, someone who was kept informed. This asymmetry is the quiet engine of the whole phenomenon. When a decision goes wrong, the trail leads to whoever made it; when a programme drifts because no decision was made, the accountability is diffuse and nobody in particular is at fault. A rational board member, watching this incentive, will prefer to be briefed rather than to commit, and will do so without ever articulating the preference.

- Composition and attendance. Boards accrete members. Every function wants a seat, every senior stakeholder wants visibility, and few are ever removed. A board of fourteen is not a decision-making body; it is a stakeholder forum, and a stakeholder forum can only really do one thing well, which is to be informed together. The larger the table, the more the meeting reverts to the only activity a large group can perform in concert — listening — and the more the genuine deciders, who are usually three or four people, find their scarce authority diluted by an audience.

• Information asymmetry. The programme team lives inside the detail; the board visits it monthly. This gap means the board is structurally dependent on the team's account of reality and poorly placed to challenge it, which pushes the meeting toward the passive reception of a narrative rather than the active interrogation of a choice. And because the team knows the board can only really absorb a story, the reporting is shaped, consciously or not, to be absorbable — smoothed, reassured, the reds explained and already-in-hand. The board receives a version of the world designed to require nothing of it.

Beneath all four sits the oldest force of the four, which is comfort. The status meeting is agreeable. It is a place where diligence is demonstrated and no one is cornered. It sends everyone away feeling that governance has occurred. The decision meeting is none of these things, and so, unless something actively holds the room to its purpose, the room will choose the agreeable ritual over the uncomfortable one.

6. The Case for Status — and Its Limit

It would be too easy to treat status reporting as the villain, and the honest version of this argument has to concede the strongest form of the opposing case, because that case is genuinely strong.

Oversight is a real function of governance, not a degenerate one. A board cannot decide well without knowing the state of the programme, and maintaining a shared, accurate picture of that state is itself valuable work. Under regulation, demonstrable oversight is not optional — a Basel programme's board that could not evidence its supervision would be failing in a duty that matters. Much of what a board does is, quite properly, assurance: satisfying itself and others that the programme is under control. The reporting apparatus we have built is not decadence. It is, in large part, the profession growing up, and the intensively-governed programmes of today fail less catastrophically and less often than the unsupervised ones of a decade ago. Anyone old enough to remember the programmes that ran for two years before anyone senior noticed they were doomed will not be sentimental about the era of light governance.

All of this is true, and none of it rescues the status meeting. The defence establishes that status is necessary; it does not establish that status is sufficient, and the failure of the modern board is precisely the collapse of the distinction between the two. Oversight is the precondition of good decisions, not a substitute for them. A board that has achieved a perfect shared understanding of the programme's state and then decides nothing has completed the preparation for governance and skipped the governance. The problem is not that these meetings contain status. The problem is that they contain only status — that the reporting, which should occupy the first short stretch of the meeting and then get out of the way, has instead colonised the whole of it, leaving no room and no appetite for the choices that were the entire point of convening these particular people.

The test is simple and uncomfortable to apply. Look back over the last six meetings of any programme board and ask what it decided — not what it noted, not what it reviewed, not what it received, but what it actually chose that would not have happened anyway. For a great many boards the honest answer is close to nothing, and the members would nonetheless describe the meetings as well run. That gap, between the felt diligence and the empty ledger of decisions, is the whole of the disease.

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7. Where the Decisions Actually Go

A decision that a board declines to make does not evaporate. This is the point most easily missed by a board comfortable in its status habit: the choices are still being made, just not by the body designed to make them, and not with the authority, the record, or the collective sightline that body was supposed to bring.

Some migrate to the corridor. The contest between the two workstreams that was "taken offline" is settled by whichever of the two sponsors is more forceful, or better connected, or simply more present in the days after the meeting — settled by influence rather than by the merits, and settled invisibly, so that the losing workstream never quite knows when or why it was starved. Some migrate to the programme director, who, finding that the board will not resolve the hard trade-offs, resolves them alone, carrying a weight of accountability that was meant to be shared and exposed to a risk that the governance structure existed precisely to spread. And some decisions are made by default, through the simple passage of time, as the window to choose closes and the option is foreclosed by events. Deciding by drift feels like not deciding, which is exactly why it is so common and so expensive; the programme pays the full price of the choice while enjoying none of the deliberation that was supposed to precede it.

Function	What the board was designed to do	What the status meeting does
Trade-offs	Resolve contention between initiatives for scarce resource	Notes the contention; defers it "offline"
Scope	Change the mandate when the business case moves	Reports variance against the original plan
Stopping	Halt a workstream that can no longer pay its way	Reviews the recovery plan, again
Accountability	Hold a shared, visible ownership of the choice	Distributes reassurance; owns nothing in particular

The cost of the decision deficit is therefore not visible as a line in any report. It shows up as programmes that are over-committed because nothing was ever stopped, as scarce specialists spread across too many initiatives because no one adjudicated the competition for them, as scope that no longer matches the business case because changing it required a decision the board would not take. These are the classic pathologies of the failing transformation, and we usually diagnose them as delivery problems. A good number of them are governance problems wearing delivery clothes — the downstream sediment of a board that met faithfully every month and chose nothing.

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8. Reclaiming the Room

The remedy is not to abolish reporting, which is necessary, nor to demand that boards be braver, which is useless advice. It is to redesign the meeting so that its structure protects the deciding from the reporting, because left unprotected the reporting will always win. A few principles, offered as a direction of travel rather than a template, point the way.

1. Report by exception, and mean it. The board does not need to be walked through sixty pages; it needs the handful of items where a tolerance has been breached or a choice is required. Compress the status to the shortest honest summary and send the detail as a pre-read for those who want it. The manuals already contain this principle — management by exception is not a new idea — but it has to be enforced against the natural expansion of the pack, and enforcement is a standing act of will, not a one-off page limit.

1. Build the agenda around decisions, not updates. An agenda that lists workstreams invites narration; an agenda that lists the specific choices the board must make this month invites governance. If there are no decisions to be made, the question is whether the board needs to meet at all, and the honesty of asking that question is itself clarifying.

1. Separate assurance from decision. Much of what consumes the board is assurance work that does not need the board's scarce, expensive, assembled authority to perform. Let the PMO, the Gateway review, and the standing reporting carry the assurance load on paper and between meetings, so that the time when these particular people are in the same room is reserved for the thing only they can do.

1. Size the board for deciding. A decision-making body is small. If fourteen people need to be informed, inform fourteen people — but do not confuse the list of the informed with the list of the deciders. Give the genuine deciders a table they can actually decide at, and give everyone else the report.

1. Make the SRO a decider, not a chairman of a reading group. The Senior Responsible Owner owns the outcome, and the meeting should be built around that ownership. The SRO's job in the room is not to walk the pack; it is to bring the choices to the table and to insist that the room make them.

> *The single most useful question a board can ask itself is not "do we understand the status?" but "what did we decide today that would not otherwise have happened?" A board that cannot answer it has been meeting, not governing.*

None of this is difficult to describe and all of it is difficult to sustain, because the gravitational pull toward the comfortable ritual never switches off. The status meeting is the low-energy state of programme governance, the shape a board relaxes into whenever the discipline that holds it to its purpose is relaxed. Reclaiming the room is therefore not a reform you complete but a tension you hold, meeting after meeting, against a current that is always running the other way.

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9. Closing: The Comfort of the Update

The deepest reason the programme board becomes a status meeting is that the status meeting asks nothing of anyone. It is possible to attend one for a year, to be diligent and prepared and engaged, and never once to be the person who had to say the hard thing in front of the person who did not want to hear it. That comfort is not a small thing to give up, and we should be honest that reclaiming the board means reintroducing a discomfort that the ritual was, in part, unconsciously designed to remove.

Governance worth the name is the willingness to make the expensive choice in the room, on the record, with the people who share the accountability present and committed. Everything else — the packs, the dashboards, the RAG statuses, the careful reporting we have spent a decade perfecting — is preparation for that act, and preparation that never arrives at the act is a rehearsal for a performance that is never staged. In a climate that rewards the demonstration of oversight above the exercise of judgement, the harder and more necessary discipline is to remember that a board was never meant only to watch. It was meant to choose. The status meeting is what a board becomes when it forgets the difference, and the work of governance is the daily labour of remembering it.