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Lean Governance Fails When Every Control Is Someone's Insurance Policy

Why programme waste survives cost pressure, process improvement and the language of value



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“Over time, governance becomes a record of previous anxieties rather than a design for present decisions.”

1. The report nobody could remove

The programme had cut consultants, reduced travel and cancelled two workstreams. It had also retained a weekly 38-page status report that required nine project managers, four workstream leads and the programme office to contribute. Producing it consumed roughly 120 hours each week.

When the programme director asked which decision the report enabled, nobody could name one.

Yet nobody was willing to remove it. Finance used three pages for the monthly forecast. Risk wanted the issue log. The sponsor liked the first-page traffic lights. Internal assurance had once requested the dependency table. Each section had an owner, a history and a plausible defence. Taken separately, nothing looked absurd. Taken together, the report had become a monument to accumulated caution.

This is where lean thinking meets programme reality. We are increasingly fluent in the language of value, flow, queues and waste. We can trace a production process and challenge every movement that does not serve the customer. But when the same questions are applied to governance, our confidence weakens. A meeting is not called waste because senior people attend it. A report is not challenged because it may be needed later. An approval is preserved because the cost of removing it is visible while the cost of waiting is dispersed.

The persistence of waste in programme governance is not caused by ignorance of lean principles. It is caused by the fact that governance waste is often somebody's protection.

2. Waste wears a respectable suit

On a factory floor, excess inventory occupies space. Rework consumes material. Waiting can be observed. In a programme, waste is more courteous. It arrives as a request for completeness, a need for alignment or a prudent additional review.

The work may even be performed well. A beautifully prepared report can still be waste if no decision changes because of it. A disciplined meeting can still be waste if every issue has already been settled elsewhere. A rigorous approval can still be waste if it repeats evidence accepted by a previous authority.

This makes programme waste difficult to confront. It is rarely idle activity. It is productive effort applied to a purpose that has become detached from delivery.

Several forms recur:

- Information inventory: documents and analysis produced before anybody is ready to use them, then revised repeatedly while they wait.
- Decision queues: matters carried from forum to forum because the people with authority are not present where the evidence is examined.
- Approval rework: the same case reformatted for different committees without changing its substance.
- Control overproduction: every project supplies the same evidence regardless of size, novelty or risk.
- Handoff loss: context is stripped out as information moves from delivery team to programme office to board.

The language matters because it changes what we see. What appears to be “good governance” when counted as activities may appear quite different when followed as a flow of evidence towards a decision.

3. The hidden customer of governance

Lean thinking asks us to define value from the customer's point of view. Programme governance immediately encounters an awkward question: who is the customer?

The sponsor needs confidence that benefits remain attainable. Finance needs a credible view of expenditure and exposure. Operations needs changes that can be absorbed. Assurance needs evidence that authority has been exercised properly. Delivery teams need timely decisions and removal of impediments.

All are legitimate customers, but their needs are not identical. When governance attempts to satisfy all of them through one universal process, it tends to maximise documentation and minimise judgement. The safest common denominator is more evidence, supplied more often and reviewed by more people.

The result is not balance. It is an uncontrolled expansion of demand.

A composite transformation programme illustrates the mechanism. Twenty-two projects reported through thirteen recurring forums. The monthly cycle required approximately 480 staff hours to prepare packs, reconcile figures and attend reviews. When a £3.2 million supplier change required approval, it moved through four bodies over five weeks. Each body asked sensible questions, but only the final board could decide. By the time approval arrived, the supplier's mobilisation window had closed and the programme incurred an estimated £240,000 in delay and remobilisation costs.

The governance system had been efficient at reviewing. It had been ineffective at deciding.

The customer of governance is not the committee receiving the paper; it is the decision that must become safer, faster or more accountable because the paper exists.

That definition is deliberately demanding. It does not excuse weak evidence. It asks every governance activity to show its contribution to the quality and timeliness of authority.

4. Why the controls survive

If the waste is visible, why does it persist? Because the benefits and penalties are distributed unevenly.

The person who asks for an extra review bears little of the programme-wide delay. The person who removes a control may be blamed if a later failure appears related. The person who produces a report is judged on accuracy and timeliness, not on whether the report was necessary. The committee chair can request more analysis without surrendering the next scheduled meeting.

This is rational behaviour inside a poorly designed system.

Governance also accumulates historically. A problem occurs; a new field, meeting or sign-off is added. The control remains after the original condition disappears because nobody owns its retirement. Programmes inherit templates built in response to risks they do not face, then add local requirements of their own.

Over time, governance becomes a record of previous anxieties rather than a design for present decisions.

The recent financial crisis has intensified the contradiction. Organisations are under pressure to reduce cost and demonstrate control simultaneously. Programme teams are asked to become leaner while boards request more frequent assurance. The visible response is often to reduce delivery capacity and preserve the reporting machinery, because governance appears mandatory while delivery effort appears variable.

That choice may improve the appearance of control as the capacity to act declines.

5. The serious case against removing “waste”

There is a powerful objection to applying lean language too aggressively. Governance is not a production line, and many controls exist to protect interests wider than immediate delivery. A review that finds nothing may still deter poor practice. Independent challenge may repeat questions precisely because the first answer came from an interested party. A complete record may have value long after the decision.

Moreover, the demand to eliminate waste can become a convenient argument for impatient sponsors who dislike scrutiny. “Lean governance” may be used to bypass dissent, compress consultation or transfer risk into operations.

This objection is correct. Not all capacity that appears unused is waste. A fire door creates value by being available, not by being used every day. Some governance performs the same function.

But that does not justify every control. It requires us to distinguish protective capacity from habitual activity.

A control earns its place when it does at least one of four things:

- changes the evidence on which a decision rests;
- brings a necessary and independent perspective;
- locates authority and accountability clearly;
- preserves a record proportionate to the consequence.

If it does none of these, its defence rests on tradition or anxiety rather than control.

The lean challenge is therefore not “remove the meeting.” It is “show the risk this meeting controls, the decision it owns and the consequence if it does not occur.” That is a more rigorous test than simple cost cutting.

6. Flow exposes authority

The most useful lean technique in governance is not a new template. It is following a decision from the moment it becomes necessary to the moment authority is exercised.

When the composite programme mapped the £3.2 million supplier change, the picture was revealing. Only 14 hours of the five-week elapsed time involved analysis or discussion. The remainder was waiting for paper deadlines, agenda slots and sequential endorsement.

The programme redesigned the route around the decision rather than the existing committees. Finance, operations, procurement and delivery examined the evidence together in one working session. The programme board retained final authority, but received a single recommendation with recorded points of dissent. The equivalent decision on a later change took eight working days.

Nothing essential had been removed:

- commercial terms were still tested;
- financial exposure was still modelled;
- operational consequences were still challenged;
- the accountable board still decided.

What disappeared was the queue between perspectives.

This is an important distinction. Lean governance does not mean fewer voices. It means arranging the voices around the decision instead of arranging the decision around the calendar.

7. Standardisation can create variation

Programme offices often respond to governance complexity with standardisation. Common packs, common gates and common status definitions promise comparability and control. There is real value in this. Without shared language, a portfolio cannot see patterns or aggregate exposure.

Yet standardisation has a limit. Treating unlike work identically creates hidden variation in effort and delay.

A low-risk upgrade using an established supplier may pass through the same initiation and approval path as an unfamiliar service affecting several business units. The small change is over-controlled; the novel change may still be under-examined because its distinct uncertainty is buried inside standard fields.

Lean thinking suggests a different discipline: standardise the minimum evidence and vary the depth of challenge according to consequence, novelty and reversibility.

Uniform governance asks	Proportionate governance asks
Has every field been completed?	What evidence could change this decision?
Has every gate been passed?	What uncertainty justifies another gate?
Has every function signed?	Which perspective is genuinely independent and necessary?
Is the pack compliant?	Is authority being exercised with sufficient evidence?

This requires more judgement, not less. It is easier to enforce a universal checklist than to decide what is proportionate. But the cost of avoiding judgement is paid in queues and false assurance.

8. The moral comfort of full calendars

Meetings provide a particular kind of comfort. They make governance visible. A crowded calendar can be interpreted as engagement; a large attendance list as alignment; a detailed minute as accountability.

But the pattern that recurs is more troubling. The more forums a programme creates, the less likely any one forum is to own the whole decision. Issues are discussed repeatedly because discussion is safer than authority. Participants represent functions, reserve their position and ask for work between meetings. The programme becomes busy around the decision while the decision itself remains still.

This is not simply inefficient. It alters behaviour. Delivery teams learn that escalation means entering a queue, so they delay raising uncertainty until the evidence is overwhelming. Sponsors resolve matters informally to avoid the process, weakening the formal record. Programme offices polish information because the quality of the pack is more controllable than the quality of the choice.

Waste in governance therefore creates more than cost. It creates avoidance.

9. A leaner form of accountability

The roots of the problem lie in a misunderstanding of control. We have often treated control as the accumulation of evidence and checkpoints. Lean thinking invites a different view: control as the ability to detect change, bring the right perspectives together and exercise authority before options disappear.

That form of control is lighter in artefacts but heavier in responsibility.

It asks sponsors to decide rather than request further comfort. It asks assurance functions to identify the risk a control addresses. It asks programme offices to measure decision lead time, not merely reporting timeliness. It asks delivery teams to expose uncertainty early enough for governance to matter.

The most useful measures may therefore be different from the familiar compliance score:

- elapsed time from decision need to decision;
- proportion of governance papers that result in an action, choice or changed view;
- number of repeated reviews of the same evidence;

- cost of delay accumulated in governance queues;
- controls retired because their original risk no longer applies.

These measures will not tell the whole story, but they direct attention towards flow and consequence.

10. What lean thinking really challenges

The easy interpretation of lean governance is economy: fewer meetings, shorter reports, smaller offices. That may reduce visible cost, but it can leave the structure untouched. A 20-page pack can be as wasteful as a 40-page pack if nobody needs it.

The harder interpretation is political. Every governance activity distributes authority, protection and exposure. Removing waste means asking who benefits from a delay, who is protected by repeated review and who has the right to demand evidence without owning the consequence.

That is why lean language is welcomed until it reaches the programme board.

The opportunity is nevertheless substantial. Organisations already possess most of the necessary disciplines: programme governance, independent assurance, portfolio oversight and increasingly iterative delivery practices. What is missing is a willingness to examine governance with the same severity applied to operational process.

We should not ask whether a meeting, report or gate is important. Importance is too easy to claim. We should ask what value it creates, what risk it controls, what decision it advances and how long work waits because it exists.

Lean thinking does not make governance less necessary. It removes the comfort of assuming that more governance means more control.

The enduring test is simple: if an activity disappeared tomorrow, which decision would become less safe, less timely or less accountable? If no one can answer, the activity is not governing the programme. The programme is governing the activity.