

BEYOND ESCALATION

Managing Upwards in Complex Programmes — Why the Skill Nobody Teaches Is the One That Matters Most

A Practitioner's Perspective on Senior Stakeholder Navigation in Programme Delivery



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1. The Skill That Has No Syllabus

Programme management has no shortage of methodologies, frameworks, and professional qualifications. We have mature approaches to planning, risk management, benefits realisation, and governance design. We train people to manage dependencies, control scope, and report status with precision.

What we do not train people to do – what no methodology adequately addresses – is manage upwards. Not escalation, which is a mechanical process. Not reporting, which is a communication exercise. But the sustained, deliberate, politically literate practice of shaping the decisions that senior leaders make about the programme, its priorities, and its future.

In my experience, this is the single capability that most reliably separates programme leaders who deliver from those who do not. And it is almost entirely absent from the professional development landscape.

2. Why Upward Management Is Different in Programmes

Project managers manage upwards too, of course. But the programme context introduces dynamics that are qualitatively different.

A project typically has a single sponsor, a defined scope, and a relatively clear success criterion. The upward relationship is primarily one of reporting and escalation: keeping the sponsor informed, and raising issues that exceed the project manager's authority to resolve. The sponsor's role is to provide air cover and remove obstacles.

A programme operates in a fundamentally different environment. Multiple sponsors, each with competing priorities. A scope that evolves as the organisation's strategy shifts. Success criteria that are contested, because different stakeholders define success differently. And a governance structure that is itself a political artefact – reflecting the organisation's power dynamics as much as its delivery needs.

In this environment, managing upwards is not about keeping people informed. It is about shaping the narrative within which decisions are made. It is about ensuring that the programme's needs are understood not as operational details but as strategic choices with consequences. And it is about maintaining the political capital that the programme needs

to survive the inevitable moments when priorities are reassessed and budgets are challenged.

3. The Three Conversations

The pattern I have observed across complex programmes is that effective upward management requires the programme leader to sustain three distinct conversations simultaneously, each with different audiences and different purposes.

The Strategic Conversation is about why the programme matters. This is the conversation that connects the programme's work to the organisation's direction — not in the abstract language of a business case written eighteen months ago, but in the current language of whatever the leadership team is worried about today. The programme leader who cannot articulate, in two sentences, why their programme is essential to the problem the chief executive discussed at last week's board meeting has already started to lose relevance.

The Political Conversation is about who benefits, who loses, and who decides. This is the conversation that most programme leaders avoid because it feels uncomfortable — too much like office politics, too far from the clean rationality of plans and milestones. But the programme that ignores the political dimension does not avoid politics; it simply ensures that politics happens to it rather than being shaped by it.

The Operational Conversation is about what the programme needs. Resources, decisions, obstacle removal, priority calls. This is the conversation programme leaders are most comfortable with, because it feels like legitimate programme management rather than political manoeuvring. But it is the least effective of the three when conducted in isolation. The programme leader who walks into a steering committee with a list of resource requests, without having first established the strategic and political context within which those requests make sense, is asking senior leaders to solve operational problems rather than make strategic investments.

The programme leader who frames every upward conversation as a problem to be solved has already lost the room — senior leaders do not want problems, they want choices. The distinction is not semantic; it determines whether the programme is perceived as a burden or an asset.

4. What Gets in the Way

If upward management is so important, why is it so poorly practised? Three forces conspire against it.

The first is professional identity. Programme managers are trained to be planners, controllers, and coordinators. The skills of upward management — narrative construction, political navigation, influence without authority — feel like they belong to a different profession. Many programme leaders experience a genuine discomfort when asked to think politically, as though doing so compromises their integrity as practitioners.

The second is governance design. Most programme governance creates the illusion that upward management is unnecessary. There is a steering committee. There are terms of reference. There are reporting templates and escalation procedures. The implicit message

is that the system will handle the upward relationship — that the programme leader's job is to feed information into the governance machine and let the machine produce decisions. In practice, the machine produces meetings. Decisions happen elsewhere.

The third is time pressure. The programme leader who is managing a complex delivery, resolving dependencies, and fighting fires on three fronts simultaneously does not have the luxury of cultivating senior relationships at leisure. Upward management gets squeezed out by operational urgency — which is precisely when it matters most, because the moments of greatest operational pressure are usually the moments when the programme is most vulnerable to political challenge.

5. The Practices That Actually Work

The programme leaders I have watched navigate this successfully share a set of practices that are rarely documented but remarkably consistent.

They invest before they need to. The worst time to build a relationship with a senior stakeholder is when you need something from them. Effective programme leaders invest time in understanding what their sponsors and key stakeholders care about — not in relation to the programme, but in relation to their own ambitions, pressures, and concerns — long before any specific request arises. This investment creates a foundation of trust and mutual understanding that makes difficult conversations possible when they become necessary.

They frame, rather than present. A status report presents information and invites the audience to draw conclusions. A frame provides the interpretive context within which information makes sense. The difference is between saying "milestone three is four weeks late due to resource constraints" and saying "the organisation faces a choice between accelerating resource allocation to this programme or accepting a delay that will push the benefits realisation beyond the financial year." The first is a statement of fact. The second is a strategic choice that demands a response.

They manage the corridor. The most important conversations in any large organisation do not happen in meetings. They happen in corridors, over coffee, in the five minutes before a meeting starts or the ten minutes after it ends. Effective programme leaders understand this and use informal contact deliberately — not to circumvent governance, but to ensure that when a formal decision is required, the ground has already been prepared.

The steering committee should never be the place where a senior stakeholder encounters a surprise. If the programme leader is relying on the formal governance process to build understanding and secure commitment, the governance process is doing work it was never designed to do.

They choose their battles. Not every issue warrants senior attention, and the programme leader who escalates everything devalues their own currency. The discipline of upward management includes the discipline of absorption — resolving what can be resolved at the programme level, and reserving senior engagement for the decisions that genuinely require it. This is a judgement call, and getting it right is one of the marks of an experienced practitioner.

6. The Organisational Dimension

Nothing in the preceding sections should suggest that upward management is solely the programme leader's responsibility. Organisations that consistently deliver complex programmes tend to create conditions that make upward management easier — not through formal processes, but through cultural norms.

These are organisations where senior leaders expect to be engaged with programmes as active participants rather than passive recipients of reports. Where the sponsor role is understood as a genuine commitment of time and political capital, not a title on an organogram. Where programme leaders are selected and developed with political literacy as an explicit criterion, not just technical competence.

The organisation that treats programme leadership as a purely technical discipline, and then wonders why its programmes fail to navigate the political environment, has created the conditions for its own disappointment.

7. The View from Inside

The hardest part of managing upwards is the loneliness of it. The programme leader who is navigating senior stakeholder dynamics cannot discuss those dynamics openly with their team — doing so would undermine the very relationships they are trying to manage. They cannot discuss them with their peers, because peer networks in most organisations are not designed for that kind of candour. And they often cannot discuss them with their own line manager, because the line management relationship and the programme sponsorship relationship operate in different dimensions.

This isolation is one of the underappreciated costs of programme leadership, and it goes some way to explaining why the skill of upward management is so unevenly distributed. It is learned through experience, through observation, and through the occasional painful lesson — not through training courses or methodology guides. The practitioners who do it well have usually done it badly first, and have had the self-awareness to learn from the experience.

That learning, in the end, is what distinguishes the programme leader who delivers from the one who merely manages. The programme is a technical construct. But the environment within which it operates is a human one, and the skill of navigating that environment upwards is the skill that no methodology can replace.