

BEYOND THE METHOD

PRINCE2 Does Not Make a Mature Programme

Why formal method adoption can conceal weak decisions, authority and delivery control



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*“Methodology is the grammar of programme management.
Maturity is the ability to say something true with it.”*

The Programme with Every Document and No Control

The programme office had done everything by the book. Each project had an initiation document, a plan, a risk log, a change-control procedure and a weekly highlight report. Stage boundaries were marked on the master schedule. Roles were named in organisation charts. The shelves held matching binders, all carrying the same version number.

Yet the programme could not answer one elementary question: who would decide whether the new customer process or the existing billing system had to change?

For eleven weeks, the business team assumed the system would accommodate the process. The systems team assumed the process would accommodate the package. Both projects reported green because each was progressing against its own plan. When the contradiction finally reached the programme board, three months of design had to be revisited.

This is the uncomfortable lesson behind the rapid adoption of formal project methods. A methodology can improve the consistency of project administration, but it cannot supply the judgement, authority or delivery discipline that programme maturity requires.

The Method Has Become the Evidence

PRINCE2 and the PMI body of knowledge have brought welcome structure to a field that too often relied on heroic individuals. They give organisations a common language for plans, risks, controls, roles and stages. That common language matters, particularly where projects must be compared, assured or handed between managers.

The trouble begins when the presence of the method is treated as evidence that the organisation can deliver.

I have watched reviews spend an hour checking whether every required heading appeared in a project initiation document and five minutes testing whether the plan depended on an unmade business decision. The document was compliant, so the project was deemed controlled. The important uncertainty remained untouched.

This happens because methodology adoption is visible and maturity is not. Training can be counted. Templates can be issued. Reviews can inspect whether products exist. Senior management can be shown a roll-out plan. By contrast, sound judgement, timely escalation, credible estimates and effective sponsorship are revealed only under pressure.

The result is a dangerous substitution: we measure whether the management products are complete instead of whether management is working.

A complete control document proves that a form was completed; it does not prove that the programme is under control.

Why the Substitution Persists

The attraction is institutional as much as technical.

- Executives want assurance that scales. A standard method appears to make unlike projects comparable and reduces dependence on individual explanations.
- Programme offices need something inspectable. It is easier to audit a template than to assess the quality of a decision.
- Suppliers prefer defined acceptance points. Named products and formal sign-offs create contractual clarity, even when the underlying outcome remains uncertain.
- Project managers value protection. Following an approved process provides a defensible record when authority is weak or priorities conflict.

Each incentive is understandable. Together they encourage an organisation to optimise for procedural safety. Managers learn that a missing document will be challenged immediately, while an unresolved dependency may survive for weeks if it is described in the right column.

A composite programme made the imbalance plain. Its central risk register contained sixty-eight entries, each with an owner and a red, amber or green rating. Only four risks were red. The most consequential issue—the absence of agreement on who owned customer data across three projects—appeared three times under different wording and had three different owners. Because no single entry looked severe, the programme board never confronted the combined exposure.

The method had recorded the fragments faithfully. The programme lacked the capability to see the whole.

The Strongest Defence of Rigour

The serious defence of wholesale methodology adoption is that organisations cannot mature through judgement alone. Judgement varies, experience is scarce, and informal management frequently hides weak discipline. Without standard definitions and control points, one manager's “nearly complete” is another manager's “not started”. Risks disappear into meeting notes. Scope changes without authority. Lessons leave when individuals leave.

That argument is right. The answer is not to discard method or celebrate improvisation. A programme managed entirely through personal authority is fragile, difficult to assure and almost impossible to repeat.

But standardisation is a foundation, not a finished capability. The distinction is the same as the difference between possessing a map and being able to navigate. The map provides shared references; it does not choose the route, recognise deteriorating weather or decide when to turn back.

A mature organisation uses the method to focus attention on judgement. An immature one uses the method to avoid judgement.

What Maturity Looks Like in Practice

Programme maturity becomes visible in the moments when the manual cannot decide.

When two projects have individually sensible plans that are collectively impossible, can someone force a choice? When a sponsor receives bad news, does the issue become a decision or a request for another report? When a stage remains viable only because sunk cost is ignored, can the board stop it? When a supplier meets its contracted milestone but the business outcome is endangered, who owns the gap?

These are capability tests, not documentation tests.

A useful review therefore starts with the programme's live decisions and works backward to the management products, rather than starting with the products and assuming they reveal the decisions.

1. Ask which three decisions now threaten the intended outcome.
2. Identify the person with authority to make each decision and the date by which it must be made.
3. Test what evidence the decision requires and whether the programme can produce it.
4. Trace the consequences across projects, suppliers, operations and the business.
5. Then inspect whether plans, risks and controls express that reality accurately.

This sequence does not weaken PRINCE2 or PMI discipline. It makes the discipline serve delivery.

The Difference Between Adoption and Capability

Method adoption asks whether people have learned a process. Capability asks whether the organisation can achieve a result repeatedly under changing conditions.

The difference appears in five places.

Method adoption	Programme capability
Produces standard plans	Produces credible commitments
Assigns named roles	Places authority with accountable people
Records risks	Exposes combined exposure early
Controls changes	Makes timely choices about value and consequence
Closes stages	Stops, redirects or continues on evidence

No template can make these transitions by itself. They depend on sponsorship that has time and authority, programme leadership that can integrate across project boundaries, candid reporting that survives bad news, and boards willing to decide rather than merely

note.

This is why adding more mandatory products often produces less control. Attention is finite. Every hour spent polishing a report that changes no decision is an hour unavailable for resolving a dependency, testing an assumption or speaking plainly to a sponsor.

Put Method Back in Its Place

The front-line lesson is not that formal methods fail in reality. It is that they are being asked to do work they were never designed to do.

A method can describe sensible controls. It can create a common vocabulary. It can remind managers of questions that experience has taught the profession to ask. These are important contributions.

It cannot make an absent sponsor present. It cannot give a project manager authority that the organisation has withheld. It cannot turn optimistic estimates into credible ones. It cannot reconcile projects whose objectives conflict. And it cannot substitute for the courage to tell a board that a programme should stop.

Organisations should continue to adopt disciplined methods, but they should stop declaring victory when the templates arrive. The true measure is whether decisions improve, dependencies surface earlier, commitments become more credible and intervention happens while choices still exist.

Methodology is the grammar of programme management. Maturity is the ability to say something true with it.