

BEYOND THE TEMPLATE

PRINCE2 Meets Reality — Why Methodology Adoption Is Not Programme Maturity

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Gap Between Framework Compliance and Delivery Capability



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The Comfort of Compliance

There is a pattern I have observed with striking regularity across large organisations, particularly in the public sector but increasingly in financial services and telecommunications. An organisation decides it needs to improve its programme delivery capability. It selects a methodology – almost always PRINCE2, sometimes supplemented by the PMBOK Guide – and proceeds to train its people, establish templates, and mandate compliance. Within eighteen months, every programme board pack carries the right headings, every project has a Business Case document, and the organisation declares itself mature.

And yet the programmes continue to struggle. Benefits remain unrealised. Timelines slip in ways the highlight reports somehow failed to predict. Sponsors disengage. The methodology is present everywhere, and delivery capability has not materially changed.

The question worth asking is not whether PRINCE2 or the PMBOK Guide are sound frameworks – they are. The question is why organisations consistently mistake their adoption for the thing they actually need: the institutional ability to deliver complex change.

Methodology as Proxy

The root of the problem is a category error. Methodology adoption is a process change – it standardises language, establishes document structures, and creates reporting mechanisms. Programme maturity, by contrast, is an organisational capability. It encompasses judgement, decision-making speed, stakeholder management, commercial acumen, risk appetite, and the capacity to adapt when circumstances shift.

PRINCE2 provides a controlled environment for managing projects. It does not – and was never designed to – create the leadership behaviours, governance instincts, or cross-functional collaboration that distinguish organisations which deliver from those which merely report.

What I observe repeatedly is that the methodology becomes a proxy for capability. The organisation measures compliance – are the documents produced, are the gates held, are the tolerances defined – and mistakes this measurement for evidence of maturity. The result is a paradox: the more rigorously the methodology is applied, the more confident the organisation becomes, and the less attention it pays to the underlying capability gaps the methodology was supposed to address.

The Template Trap

The most dangerous moment in an organisation's programme management journey is when it confuses the template for the thinking the template was designed to provoke.

Consider the Business Case. PRINCE2 rightly insists that every project requires one, and that it should be reviewed and updated at each stage boundary. In a mature organisation, the Business Case is a living instrument — challenged, refined, and genuinely used to test whether the investment remains sound. In an immature organisation that has adopted PRINCE2, the Business Case is a document produced at initiation, approved with minimal scrutiny, and never meaningfully revisited. The template exists. The discipline does not.

The same pattern plays out across the methodology's control mechanisms. Exception reports are written but rarely trigger genuine escalation. Lessons learned are captured in logs that no one reads. Stage gates are held, but the decision to proceed is a formality rather than a genuine test of viability. The architecture of control is present; the culture of control is absent.

What Maturity Actually Requires

Programme maturity is built on foundations that no methodology can supply. In my experience, the organisations that genuinely deliver well share characteristics that have little to do with which framework they have adopted:

- Decision-making speed and quality. Mature organisations make difficult decisions early — to stop a project, to change scope, to remove a programme manager who is not performing. Immature organisations defer these decisions, and the methodology's escalation paths give them cover to do so.
- Honest reporting. The willingness to surface problems before they become crises is a cultural trait, not a procedural one. No amount of highlight report templates will create honesty where the organisational incentives punish the bearer of bad news.
- Commercial and benefits discipline. Understanding what a programme is actually worth — and holding that understanding against delivery reality — requires commercial judgement that sits well beyond the methodology's scope.
- Adaptive governance. The ability to adjust the weight and formality of governance to the risk and complexity of the programme, rather than applying a uniform process regardless of context.
- Skilled practitioners. People who understand not just what the methodology asks for, but why — and who have the experience to know when to follow it closely and when to adapt it.

A Different Starting Point

The organisations I have seen make genuine progress toward programme maturity tend to start not with methodology adoption but with an honest assessment of where their

delivery capability actually fails. They ask: where do our programmes break down? Is it in planning, in stakeholder management, in commercial negotiation, in technical decision-making, in leadership? And they address those specific weaknesses directly, using the methodology as a supporting structure rather than a substitute for capability.

This is harder, slower, and less satisfying than a methodology rollout. It cannot be declared complete in a board paper. But it addresses the actual problem — which is never the absence of a framework, but the absence of the organisational capability to deliver complex change.

Methodology tells you what to do. Maturity is knowing why, and having the judgement to adapt when the standard answer is wrong.

The distinction matters because the investment required is fundamentally different. Methodology adoption costs training budgets and consultancy fees. Building genuine programme maturity costs leadership attention, cultural change, and the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about organisational capability. The first is a procurement exercise. The second is a transformation in its own right.