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Portfolio Triage Under Extreme Constraint — Why Stop/Continue Decisions Expose Everything Your Governance Was Hiding

A Practitioner's Perspective on Portfolio Decision-Making Under Crisis Conditions



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“The organisations that moved fastest were not the ones with the best prioritisation frameworks — they were the ones whose leaders had the nerve to kill projects that still looked viable on paper.”

1. The Illusion of Preparedness

Every large organisation I have worked with in the past decade has had a portfolio prioritisation framework. Most of them are elaborate constructions — weighted scoring matrices, strategic alignment assessments, benefit-cost ratios stacked in colour-coded spreadsheets that suggest a level of precision their inputs never warranted. In stable conditions, these frameworks serve a useful political function: they give investment committees a defensible rationale for decisions that are, in practice, already made. They create the appearance of rigour.

What they do not do — what almost none of them do — is help an organisation make fast, defensible stop/continue decisions when the ground shifts beneath it.

The current economic climate is making this painfully clear. Organisations that entered 2008 with portfolios of forty, sixty, or eighty active initiatives are now facing budget reductions of thirty to forty per cent, imposed not over a planning cycle but over weeks. The question is no longer which projects best align with our five-year strategy. The question is which projects do we kill today, and can we defend that decision tomorrow.

2. What Triage Actually Requires

The language of triage is borrowed from battlefield medicine, and it is worth preserving the analogy precisely because it is uncomfortable. Triage is not optimisation. It is not about finding the best portfolio. It is about accepting that you cannot save everything and making rapid, defensible decisions about what to let go.

This demands three things that most portfolio governance frameworks were never designed to provide.

First, it demands speed. A weighted scoring exercise that takes six weeks to complete is useless when the CFO needs a revised investment profile by Friday. The organisations I have seen respond most effectively are those that could produce a credible view of their portfolio within days — not because they had better tools, but because they had maintained basic hygiene: current cost-to-complete estimates, honest status assessments, and a shared understanding of which initiatives were genuinely critical versus merely approved.

The crisis did not create bad portfolios. It revealed that most organisations had never truly known what was in their portfolios — not in the way that matters when you have to choose.

Second, it demands clarity about what you are optimising for. In normal conditions, portfolio decisions balance strategic alignment, financial return, risk, and resource capacity. Under crisis conditions, the hierarchy collapses. Cash preservation dominates. Contractual commitments and sunk costs — which every textbook tells you to ignore — suddenly matter enormously, because unwinding a contract mid-programme carries real penalties. The rational economic framework and the practical reality diverge sharply, and the organisations that navigate this well are those that acknowledge the divergence rather than pretending it does not exist.

Third, it demands the nerve to act on imperfect information. This is where most governance frameworks fail most completely. They were built to support consensus-driven decision-making in conditions of reasonable certainty. Triage requires the opposite: decisive action under radical uncertainty, with the explicit acceptance that some decisions will prove wrong.

3. The Governance Gap

In my experience, the gap between what portfolio governance promises and what it delivers under stress is explained by a structural problem: most frameworks were designed for allocation, not de-allocation.

The entire apparatus — the business cases, the gate reviews, the benefits maps — is oriented around justifying new investment. It answers the question should we start this? It has almost nothing to say about the question should we stop this, and if so, how?

Stopping a programme is politically, contractually, and operationally harder than starting one. It requires writing off sunk costs, breaking commitments to sponsors and stakeholders, managing the human consequences of disbanding teams, and — most difficult of all — accepting institutional responsibility for a decision that looks like failure. Portfolio governance frameworks rarely acknowledge any of this. The stop gate, where it exists at all, is typically a formality.

- The business case process is thorough at initiation but silent on termination criteria
- Portfolio dashboards track progress and spend but rarely track the cost of continuation versus the cost of orderly wind-down
- Governance boards are structured to approve and oversee, not to cancel
- The political economy of most organisations punishes the sponsor who kills a project far more harshly than it punishes the sponsor who lets a failing project drift

The result is that when triage becomes necessary, organisations discover they lack the information, the decision criteria, and the institutional muscle to do it well.

4. What the Better Organisations Are Doing Differently

The pattern I have observed across several portfolio triage exercises in recent months is that the organisations responding most effectively share a set of common characteristics — none of which have much to do with the sophistication of their prioritisation tools.

They separate the triage decision from the portfolio optimisation decision. Triage comes first: a rapid, rough-cut exercise that categorises the portfolio into three groups — initiatives that are clearly essential and must continue, initiatives that are clearly dispensable and should be stopped immediately, and a contested middle ground that requires judgement. The temptation to optimise the whole portfolio in one pass is strong but counterproductive; it takes too long and generates too much political friction. The better approach is to clear the obvious decisions fast and then focus governance attention on the genuinely difficult choices.

They use simple, transparent criteria. The most effective triage frameworks I have seen use no more than four or five dimensions — typically some combination of strategic criticality, contractual or regulatory obligation, cash impact of stopping, and reversibility. Anything more complex slows the process without improving the decisions.

They vest authority in a small group with genuine power. Triage by committee does not work. The organisations that have moved decisively have typically empowered a small group — three to five senior leaders — with explicit authority to make binding stop/continue recommendations, subject to board ratification. This is uncomfortable for organisations accustomed to consensus governance, but speed and decisiveness are inseparable.

The organisations that moved fastest were not the ones with the best frameworks. They were the ones that had already built the trust, the data, and the decision-making authority to act without them.

5. The Harder Lesson

The deeper lesson emerging from this period is not about crisis management. It is about what portfolio governance should have been doing all along.

If your prioritisation framework cannot support a rapid triage exercise — if it takes weeks to produce a credible portfolio view, if your cost-to-complete estimates are stale, if your governance boards have no practice at making stop decisions — then the framework was never doing what you thought it was doing. It was producing the appearance of portfolio management without the substance.

The organisations that will come through this period with their portfolios intact are the ones that treated portfolio discipline as a continuous practice, not a periodic ceremony. They maintained live data. They practised making hard choices in calm conditions. They built governance structures with the authority and the habit of saying no.

The rest are discovering, under the worst possible conditions, that their governance was decorative. That is an expensive lesson, and it did not need to be learned this way.