

BEYOND THE SALAMI SLICE

Programme Descoping as Strategic Discipline

A Practitioner's Perspective on What to Keep When Everything Is Cut



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*“Descoping is not the failure of a programme to deliver everything;
it is the test of whether anyone ever understood what the
programme was for.”*

1. The Cut That Reveals Everything

Over the past eighteen months I have watched a great many programmes shrink. The budgets that looked settled in the summer of 2008 were reopened in the autumn, cut in the winter, and cut again in the spring. By now, descoping is not an occasional event that a programme suffers; for most of the transformation portfolios I see, it has become the main activity of the last year. And yet almost nobody treats it as a discipline. We treat it as an embarrassment — a thing to be done quickly, quietly, and with as little thought as the deadline allows.

That is the mistake I want to argue against. Descoping is where a programme's real priorities are finally revealed, and doing it badly wastes the one clarifying gift a downturn offers. In easier years, a programme can carry a great deal of scope that nobody has ever seriously justified, because there is money enough to avoid the argument. The cut forces the argument. Handled well, it is the most strategic thing a programme director does all year. Handled badly — which is the norm — it quietly destroys the value the programme was meant to create while appearing, on paper, to have saved money.

2. Why We Descope Badly

The crude methods are so common they have become almost invisible. Three of them do most of the damage.

- The across-the-board cut. Finance asks every workstream for the same percentage, and calls the fairness of it a virtue. But an even cut assumes every part of the programme creates value at the same rate, which is never true. It takes the same proportion from the workstream that carries the whole business case as from the one nobody would miss. It is the least strategic instrument imaginable, chosen precisely because it requires no judgement and no one to defend a decision.
- Defer rather than decide. Faced with a cut, the easy move is to push scope into a later phase rather than to kill it. This feels less brutal, and it lets everyone avoid saying out loud that something will never happen. But a programme whose later phases are stuffed with everything the earlier phases could not afford is not a plan; it is a queue of deferred disappointments, and the people staffing it know it.
- Protect the visible. Under pressure, programmes cut what is hard to see — the data migration, the testing, the change and adoption work, the unglamorous plumbing — and protect what will be noticed if it disappears. The result is a programme that still looks whole from the outside and is hollow within, which is exactly the shape that fails eighteen months later when the foundations turn out not to have been built.

What these three have in common is that they are all ways of avoiding the decision while appearing to make it. They spread the pain so thinly that no one has to own a judgement about what actually matters.

An across-the-board cut is not a decision about priorities. It is the refusal to make one, dressed up as fairness.

3. What Descoping Is Actually For

The discipline begins with a change of question. The crude approaches all ask what can we take out? — which invites you to look for the least painful subtractions. The strategic question is the opposite: what must survive for this programme to still be worth doing at all? You define the irreducible core — the smallest version of the programme that still delivers a benefit worth having — and you defend it absolutely. Everything else becomes negotiable in a way the core never is.

This sounds obvious and is surprisingly rare, because it requires something uncomfortable: a willingness to say that some of the programme was never essential. Most large programmes accreted scope over their life — a capability promised to win a stakeholder here, a feature added to close an objection there. A downturn is the moment to admit how much of that was political rather than valuable. The cut, approached this way, is not a loss. It is a return to the thing the programme was originally for, stripped of the accommodations that were made to get it approved.

“The question is never what can we take out. It is what must survive for this to still be worth doing.”

There is a second purpose, less obvious. Descoping well protects the credibility of the programme with the people funding it. A director who comes to the board with a thoughtful cut — here is the core, here is what we are stopping and why, here is what the reduced programme will and will not deliver — is treated very differently from one who returns a uniform percentage and hopes no one asks what it cost. The first is exercising judgement the board cannot easily do itself. The second is confirming the board's fear that the programme was padded all along.

4. The Questions That Do the Work

When I am helping a programme decide what to keep, the useful conversation turns on a small number of questions, asked of every significant piece of scope.

1. Does the benefit case still stand without it? If the core business case survives the removal of a component, that component was a nice-to-have wearing the costume of a necessity. Say so.
2. Does removing it break something else? Scope is rarely independent. The unglamorous item that looks like an easy cut is often the thing three other benefits

quietly depend on. Map the dependencies before you cut, not after.

3. Is it expensive because it is valuable, or valuable because it is expensive? Programmes fall in love with their hardest components. The effort already sunk into a thing is not evidence that it should survive; it is often the reason it should be first to go.
4. What does keeping it cost us elsewhere? Every pound kept in one workstream is a pound taken from another. The real question is never whether a component is worth something, but whether it is worth more than what its survival displaces.

None of these is answerable with a spreadsheet alone. They demand the judgement of people who understand what the programme is actually for — which is precisely why the across-the-board cut is so seductive, and so corrosive. It lets you avoid ever convening that judgement.

5. The Discipline Worth Keeping

My argument is not that the cuts of the past year have been welcome. They have not. But they have taught something worth holding onto once conditions ease, whenever that is. The discipline of asking what must survive — of defining the irreducible core, mapping the dependencies, and defending value rather than spreading pain — is not a recession skill to be shelved in better times. It is simply good programme management, made unavoidable by scarcity.

The programmes I have most respected this year are not the ones that avoided the cut. Almost none did. They are the ones that used it — that came out the other side smaller, clearer, and more certain of their own purpose than they were when money was plentiful and no one had to choose. Descoping, done as a discipline rather than an apology, is one of the few genuinely useful things a hard year gives you. It would be a waste to survive the downturn only to forget it.