

BEYOND THE GREEN REPORT

Projects Without Programmes

Why disciplined projects can all report green while the business gets nothing — and what filling the programme gap actually requires



Giovanni Leonardi

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“The project is where the work is visible. The outcome is where the benefit lives.”

1. The Wall of Green

Walk the floor of almost any large change effort at the moment and you will find the same paradox: a wall of project reports, most of them green, sitting above a business that is not visibly getting what it was promised. Each project is delivering. The sum of the projects is not. What follows is about the space between those two facts — the space where a programme should be, and where, in most organisations today, there is instead a vacuum.

The argument is that we have built a serviceable discipline for delivering projects and almost no discipline for delivering the outcomes that projects are only ever a means to. A project produces an output — a system, a process, a reorganised department. An outcome is the change in the business that those outputs, combined and bedded in, are supposed to create. Between the two sits a layer of coordination, sequencing, and benefits ownership that the emerging language calls programme management. In practice that layer is frequently missing. Projects are chartered, funded, and governed one by one; the outcome they jointly serve is owned by no one, tracked by nothing, and discovered to be absent only when the money has been spent.

This is not a failure of individual competence. The project managers are often excellent, and their projects often succeed on their own terms. It is a structural failure — a gap in the operating model that persists because the incentives, the funding mechanisms, and the reporting instruments all point at projects and none of them point at outcomes. The vacuum is stable because everything around it rewards the very behaviour that creates it. What it takes to fill it is considerably more than appointing someone with the word programme in their title and handing them a consolidated plan to watch.

2. Three Reports, All Green

Consider a not-uncommon situation. A financial services business decides to transform its handling of commercial customers. The intent is straightforward to state: reduce the time to bring a new commercial client on board from six weeks to one, and cut the cost of doing so by a third. To get there, three initiatives are launched. One replaces the ageing account-opening system. One redesigns the underwriting process. One stands up a data-cleansing effort to fix the customer records that both of the others depend on.

Each is run as a project. Each has a manager, a plan, a budget, and a monthly report. Fourteen months in, all three reports are green. The new system is delivered and working. The redesigned process is documented, signed off, and trained out. The data has been cleansed to the agreed standard. Every project has met its specification. The programme director — if there is one — reports that the portfolio is on track.

And the time to onboard a commercial customer is still five and a half weeks.

What happened is that the three outputs never combined into the outcome. The new system was built to the process as it existed when the requirements were frozen, not to the redesigned process, because the redesign finished three months later. The redesigned process assumed a quality of data that the cleansing effort delivered for existing records but not for the daily inflow of new ones, because no one had chartered the piece of work that kept new records clean. Each project drew its boundary at the edge of its own deliverable and stopped there. The gaps between the projects — the integration of system to process, the sustaining of data quality, the retraining of the front line on the combined new way of working — belonged to no project, and therefore to no one.

A project is accountable for its output. An outcome is what happens in the seams between outputs. When nothing owns the seams, the seams are where the benefit leaks away — and every individual report can be green while the whole delivers nothing.

This is the vacuum in miniature. Not incompetence, not laziness, not poor project management — the opposite, in fact. Disciplined projects, each defending its own scope, producing a result that adds up to less than the sum of its parts.

3. Why the Vacuum Forms

The vacuum is not an accident of any one organisation. It forms reliably, and it forms for reasons built into how change is funded and governed.

The first reason is that money moves as projects. Capital is approved against business cases, and business cases are written for discrete initiatives with discrete deliverables, because that is what a finance function can appraise and control. A request to fund an outcome — a fluid, multi-year reshaping of a capability, whose internal composition will change as it proceeds — is much harder to appraise and much harder to control, and so it is quietly reformatted into a set of projects that can be. The funding mechanism thus creates projects as its natural unit and has no natural unit for the thing above them.

The second reason is that accountability follows the deliverable. It is easy to hold someone to account for a system delivered by a date within a budget. It is hard to hold anyone to account for an onboarding time that depends on three initiatives, a dozen operational teams, and the behaviour of the front line months after the projects have closed. So accountability settles at the level where it can be cleanly assigned — the project — and evaporates at the level where it cannot — the outcome. Managers are rational; they attend to what they are measured on.

The third reason is that the instruments we have all report at project level. The status report, the RAG rating, the milestone plan, the risk log — the entire apparatus of change reporting was built to track projects, and it tracks them well. There is no equivalent, in most organisations, for tracking whether an outcome is materialising. The dashboards aggregate project status upward and call the sum a programme, but a stack of green projects is not evidence of an outcome; it is only evidence of projects. We measure what we can measure, and the outcome is not among the things the instruments were built to see.

- Money is appraised and controlled as projects, because outcomes are too fluid to appraise.

- Accountability settles on deliverables, because outcomes are too diffuse to pin.
- Reporting tracks project status, because that is what the instruments were built to see.

Put these three together and the vacuum is over-determined. Every force in the system pushes work down into projects and leaves the space above them empty. An organisation would have to act deliberately, against the grain of its own funding and reporting machinery, to fill it — and most do not know that they need to, because all their instruments are reassuringly green.

4. The Comfort of the Green Report

Here we should give the opposing view its due, because there is a respectable case for running change as a disciplined set of projects and being suspicious of the programme layer.

The case runs like this. Programmes are where accountability goes to die. A project has a clear deliverable, a clear owner, a clear end. A "programme" is often a way of avoiding all three — a soft, sprawling, perpetual thing that absorbs cost, resists closure, and lets people hide poor delivery behind grand talk of outcomes and benefits. Better to decompose ambition into hard-edged projects that can actually be delivered and closed, and to be ruthless about it, than to erect an expensive coordinating superstructure that produces plans and reports but no working software. Anyone who has seen a bloated programme office generating documents nobody reads will feel the force of this.

It is a fair warning, and it identifies a real failure mode. But it mistakes the abuse of the programme layer for the thing itself. The answer to a bloated, unaccountable programme is not no programme; it is an accountable one. The green-report comfort the sceptic offers — decompose everything into deliverable projects and trust the sum — is precisely the comfort that produces the five-and-a-half-week onboarding time. The projects were hard-edged, delivered, and closed. The ruthlessness was real. And it delivered nothing, because ruthless project delivery optimises the parts and is structurally blind to the seams.

The sceptic is right that a programme must be held to account. The mistake is concluding that, because programmes are hard to hold to account, we should do without them. The seams between projects are real work; someone must own them; and pretending otherwise does not make the work disappear — it only makes the failure arrive later and cost more.

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5. What Filling the Vacuum Actually Requires

If the vacuum is structural, filling it requires structural changes, not a job title. Appointing a programme director and handing them a consolidated Gantt chart of the existing projects changes nothing; it merely gives the vacuum a custodian. Three things have to

change.

1. Fund the outcome, then charter the projects beneath it. The unit that receives money and carries a business case should be the outcome — the onboarding capability, not the account-opening system. Projects are then chartered within that funded outcome as its changing internal composition, and can be started, merged, or stopped as the outcome demands without each requiring its own capital appeal. This is harder for the finance function, and the difficulty is the point: it forces the outcome to have an owner who controls real money, which is the only kind of ownership that holds.
1. Give the seams to a single accountable owner. Someone must be accountable for the outcome itself — not for a plan, but for the number: the onboarding time, the cost per customer, the benefit in the business case. Crucially, that person's remit is the space between the projects — the integration, the sequencing, the sustaining of the combined new way of working after the projects close. Their job is precisely the work that no project's scope contains. If their success is measured by whether the projects delivered, they will do the wrong job; it must be measured by whether the outcome materialised.
1. Instrument the outcome, not just the projects. Alongside the project RAG reports there must be a measure of the outcome as it actually stands in the business — the real onboarding time, sampled monthly, from the day funding begins. This measure will be red long after the projects go green, and that discomfort is its entire value. It is the only instrument that can see the seams. An organisation that watches the outcome measure will discover the vacuum while there is still time and money to act; an organisation that watches only the project reports will discover it at the closedown celebration.

The connecting logic matters. Funding the outcome creates an owner with real authority; giving that owner the seams gives them the right job; instrumenting the outcome gives them the one signal that tells them whether the job is being done. Remove any of the three and the other two collapse — an owner without funding is a figurehead, funding without a seam-owner is a slush fund, and either without an outcome measure is flying blind. The three are a mechanism, not a menu.

6. The Discipline We Have Not Yet Built

There is a body of emerging guidance that names this layer and begins to codify it — the recognition that managing a programme is a distinct discipline from managing a project, with its own concerns of benefits, of blueprint, of the transition of new capability into business-as-usual. It is welcome, and it is early. The guidance exists; the practice, in most places, does not. The gap between the two is the vacuum this essay has been describing.

Closing it is not primarily a matter of adopting a method, though a method helps. It is a matter of accepting an uncomfortable truth about our current competence: we have become good at the part of change that is legible — the project, with its clean scope and its satisfying closedown — and we have left unbuilt the part that is illegible and that actually carries the value. The project is where the work is visible. The outcome is where the benefit lives. And for now, between the two, in most organisations, there is a wall of green reports and, beneath it, a business still waiting for what it was promised.

The first step to filling a vacuum is to notice that it is there. The instruments will not tell you; they were built to look the other way. You have to walk the floor, read past the green,

and ask the only question that matters: not are the projects delivering? — they usually are — but is the outcome arriving? More often than the reports suggest, the honest answer is: not yet, and nobody here is accountable for the fact.