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The Accidental Programme Manager — How Governance Roles Emerged from Crisis

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Birth of a Discipline That Nobody Planned



The Accidental Programme Manager — How Governance Roles Emerged from Crisis

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“Nobody set out to become a programme manager — they set out to fix a problem that had grown too large for any single project to contain, and the role crystallised around them.”

1. A Role Without a Blueprint

Ask anyone currently working as a programme manager how they got into the role and you will hear a remarkably consistent story. It goes something like this: I was running a project, and then the projects multiplied, and then someone needed to coordinate across them, and then someone needed to talk to the board about the whole thing, and then one day I looked up and realised I was managing a programme. Nobody appointed me. Nobody trained me. I just ended up here.

This is not a failure of career planning. It is the origin story of an entire discipline. Programme management, as it exists today, was not designed. It was improvised — assembled in real time by people responding to coordination problems that outgrew the structures available to contain them.

Understanding this matters, because the improvised origins of the role explain much about its current strengths and weaknesses. The programme managers who built the discipline from scratch brought with them a pragmatism and a tolerance for ambiguity that no formal training programme could replicate. They also brought gaps — in governance thinking, in benefit management, in stakeholder strategy — that the profession is only now beginning to address.

2. The Coordination Crisis

The conditions that gave rise to the programme management role are not difficult to reconstruct. Through the late 1990s, organisations undertook increasingly ambitious technology-enabled change initiatives. Enterprise resource planning implementations. Infrastructure consolidation programmes. The rush to e-commerce readiness. Y2K remediation. Each of these required the coordination of multiple projects across multiple business units, and each exposed the same structural limitation: project management methods, however well applied, operated at the level of individual projects and had nothing to say about the interdependencies between them.

The interdependencies were where the real complexity lived. A project to replace a core financial system could not succeed unless the data migration project delivered clean data on time. The data migration project depended on business process redesign in three operational divisions. The process redesign required organisational change management that nobody had scoped and nobody was accountable for. Each project, viewed in isolation, was manageable. Viewed as a system — which is what they were — they were a

coordination nightmare.

Project management tells you how to deliver a defined piece of work. It does not tell you what to do when six pieces of work are entangled, their dependencies are shifting, and the business outcome depends on all of them arriving together.

Into this gap stepped individuals who, through a combination of seniority, credibility, and willingness, took on the coordination role. They were not programme managers — the title barely existed outside the defence and aerospace sectors. They were senior project managers, IT directors, business change leads, or simply the most capable person available who could see the whole picture. They invented the role because the alternative was chaos.

3. Making It Up as They Went

The early programme managers — the accidental ones — had almost no formal guidance to draw on. PRINCE2 addressed project management but not programme management. MSP existed in embryonic form but had not yet achieved the penetration it would later reach. The APM's body of knowledge touched on multi-project management but offered little practical guidance for the kind of cross-cutting, politically complex coordination work that programmes actually required.

What these practitioners did have was experience. They understood how organisations actually worked — not the organisation chart version, but the real version, with its informal power structures, its unwritten rules, and its capacity for passive resistance to any change that threatened established interests. They understood that the technical delivery was often the easier part; the harder part was navigating the politics, managing the expectations, and maintaining the coalition of support that any significant programme requires.

They developed their own practices, largely by trial and error. Some of these practices have since been codified into formal methods. The programme board, the benefit profile, the tranche review, the blueprint — these did not spring fully formed from a methodology working group. They evolved from the practical responses of people who needed a way to govern something that was too complex for any existing structure.

Other practices remained informal and personal: the corridor conversation that resolved a deadlock faster than any formal escalation process; the instinct for when a project manager was telling the truth about progress and when they were managing upwards; the ability to translate between the language of technology and the language of business without losing the substance of either.

4. The Leadership Dimension

What distinguished the successful accidental programme managers from the unsuccessful ones was not technical skill or methodological knowledge. It was leadership — a particular kind of leadership that the profession has been slow to recognise and even slower to develop.

Programme leadership is distinct from project leadership, and the distinction matters. A project manager leads a defined team toward a defined objective. The authority is relatively clear, the scope is relatively bounded, and the success criteria are relatively unambiguous. A programme manager leads across organisational boundaries, without direct authority over most of the people whose cooperation is essential. The objectives are contested, the scope is shifting, and success is defined differently by every stakeholder in the governance chain.

This requires a set of capabilities that are more political than technical: the ability to build and maintain coalitions; the ability to negotiate trade-offs between competing interests without losing the trust of any party; the ability to tell a governance board what it needs to hear rather than what it wants to hear, and to survive the consequences; the ability to hold a vision of the end state steady while everything around it changes.

The accidental programme managers who succeeded did so not because they had the right method but because they had the right instincts — for people, for politics, and for the difference between what an organisation says it wants and what it will actually tolerate.

These are not capabilities that can be taught in a five-day course. They are developed over years of practice, failure, and reflection. The profession's current reliance on certification as a proxy for competence is, in part, a failure to grapple with this reality.

5. The Professionalisation Challenge

The discipline is now at an inflection point. The accidental phase is giving way to something more deliberate. Professional bodies are defining competency frameworks. Training providers are building curricula. Organisations are creating career paths with programme management as an explicit destination rather than an accidental one.

This is, on balance, a good thing. The ad hoc origins of the discipline meant that quality was wildly variable — for every brilliant improviser, there were several people who had simply been promoted beyond their capability and left to sink or swim. A more structured approach to developing programme managers should, over time, raise the baseline.

The danger is that professionalisation strips out the very qualities that made the best accidental programme managers effective. If the profession defines itself primarily in terms of method and process — if it tells aspiring programme managers that the path to competence runs through PRINCE2 Practitioner and MSP Practitioner and a shelf of management products — it will produce technically proficient administrators who cannot lead, cannot navigate politics, and cannot exercise the kind of judgement that complex programmes demand.

The alternative is to build a profession that takes both dimensions seriously: the methodological rigour and the leadership capability, the process discipline and the political intelligence. This is harder to design, harder to assess, and harder to certify. But it is what the work actually requires.

6. What This Means for Organisations

Organisations that are serious about programme delivery need to think carefully about how they identify, develop, and support the people they put in charge of their most complex and consequential initiatives. The current approach — promote the best project manager, send them on a course, and hope for the best — is inadequate.

What is needed is a more deliberate investment in the development of programme leadership capability. This means structured exposure to increasingly complex coordination challenges, with genuine mentoring from practitioners who have done it before. It means creating the organisational conditions in which programme managers can be honest without being punished, can challenge without being marginalised, and can learn from failure without being discarded.

The accidental programme managers built this discipline from nothing. The question now is whether the organisations they serve will invest in building it properly — or whether they will continue to leave it to chance, and continue to be surprised when chance does not deliver.