

BEYOND THE BACKLASH

The Benefits of Process — What Genuine Discipline Actually Looks Like

A Practitioner's Perspective on Why the Case Against Process Misses the Point Entirely



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“The organisations that get process right are the ones you never hear complaining about it — because for them, it is not a burden imposed from above but a discipline adopted from within.”

1. The Counter-Argument Nobody Wants to Hear

It has become fashionable to blame process for the failures of programme and portfolio delivery. The argument runs something like this: organisations adopted PRINCE2, ITIL, MSP and their various cousins, loaded themselves with governance frameworks and reporting obligations, and the result was not better delivery but slower, more bureaucratic, more expensive delivery. Process, the argument concludes, is the problem.

This argument is seductive, politically convenient, and substantially wrong.

It is wrong not because the frustrations are imaginary — they are not; the overhead of poorly implemented process is real and corrosive — but because it confuses the abuse of a thing with the thing itself. The organisations that have drowned in process bureaucracy have not failed because they adopted methods. They have failed because they adopted methods badly: mechanistically, without judgement, and without any clear connection between the process activity and the outcome it was supposed to serve.

The distinction matters, because if we throw out process discipline along with process bureaucracy, we will find ourselves back where we started — and where we started was worse.

2. What We Had Before

It is easy to forget, amid the current complaints about governance overhead, what programme and portfolio delivery looked like before the process frameworks arrived. The picture was not romantic.

Programmes were initiated on the basis of a conversation and a handshake. Scope was whatever the most senior person in the room said it was. Budgets were guesses, dressed up as estimates and never revisited. Risk was something that happened to other people's programmes. And when things went wrong — as they reliably did — nobody could explain what had happened, because nobody had documented anything.

The professional bodies and the frameworks they produced — PRINCE2, MSP, the OGC's Gateway process, the emerging portfolio management standards — were a response to this chaos. They introduced structure where there had been none: defined roles, documented decisions, stage-gated progression, explicit business justification. These were not arbitrary bureaucratic inventions. They were hard-won responses to real, repeated, expensive failures.

The question is not whether organisations need process discipline – the evidence on that point is overwhelming. The question is what genuine discipline looks like, as distinct from the compliance theatre that has colonised too many programme environments.

3. The Shape of Genuine Discipline

Genuine process discipline has characteristics that distinguish it sharply from its bureaucratic imitation. Understanding the difference is essential for any organisation serious about portfolio delivery.

It is purposeful. Every process activity can be traced to a specific decision it supports or a specific risk it mitigates. If a management product exists, someone can explain who uses it, what decision it informs, and what would go wrong without it. The moment a process element cannot answer that test, it should be removed. Genuine discipline is lean by nature – not because leanness is a value in itself, but because purposefulness eliminates waste.

It is tailored. A method is a starting point, not a destination. The organisations that use process well adapt their methods to the context of each programme and portfolio – its risk profile, its complexity, its political environment, its delivery cadence. A high-risk regulatory programme demands a different weight of governance from a straightforward infrastructure refresh. Genuine discipline knows the difference; bureaucratic compliance does not.

It is owned by the people who do the work. In organisations where process works, the delivery teams see the method as their tool – something that helps them organise their thinking, communicate their progress, and escalate their concerns. In organisations where process fails, the delivery teams see the method as something imposed on them by a PMO that does not understand their work. The difference is not in the method; it is in how it was introduced and who shaped its application.

It is honest. The most important function of process discipline is that it creates a structure within which honest assessment can happen. A well-run stage gate is not a rubber stamp; it is a genuine decision point where a programme can be stopped, redirected, or accelerated based on evidence. A well-maintained risk register is not a compliance artefact; it is a living document that forces uncomfortable conversations about what might go wrong. Process discipline, at its best, is the mechanism by which organisations tell themselves the truth.

4. The Portfolio Perspective

The case for genuine process discipline becomes even stronger when viewed from the portfolio level. Individual programmes can sometimes muddle through on talent and momentum alone, without much formal method. Portfolios cannot.

A portfolio is, by definition, a collection of competing demands on finite resources. Managing it requires the ability to compare programmes on a consistent basis: their relative priority, their risk exposure, their resource requirements, their expected benefits. Without a common process framework – a shared language for how programmes are

defined, assessed, governed, and reported — the portfolio becomes ungovernable. Decisions about what to fund, what to stop, and what to defer become purely political, driven by whoever shouts loudest rather than by any rational assessment of value and risk.

The portfolio management disciplines that are now emerging — still immature, still contested, but recognisably distinct from programme and project management — are an attempt to bring this rigour to the investment level. They depend entirely on the existence of consistent, reliable process at the programme level below them. A portfolio built on programmes that each define success differently, report on different cycles, and manage risk according to different standards is a portfolio that cannot be managed. It can only be survived.

At the portfolio level, process discipline is not about controlling individual programmes — it is about creating the conditions under which rational investment decisions become possible.

5. Why the Backlash Is Dangerous

The current mood of anti-process sentiment is understandable but dangerous. It is dangerous because it risks conflating two very different propositions. The first — that process bureaucracy should be challenged and reduced — is correct and overdue. The second — that process discipline itself is unnecessary or counterproductive — is a recipe for regression.

The organisations most at risk are the ones that have never experienced the alternative. A generation of programme professionals has grown up in an environment where PRINCE2 and its peers were simply the way things were done. They have never had to deliver a complex programme with no method, no governance framework, and no reporting structure. They assume that the current level of order is natural — that it would persist even without the frameworks that sustain it.

It would not. Order in complex organisations is not a default state; it is an achievement, and it requires maintenance. The process frameworks, for all their flaws and all their bureaucratic accretions, are part of what maintains it. Strip them away without replacing them with something equally disciplined, and the chaos returns — not immediately, but inevitably.

6. The Reform That Is Needed

The right response to the current frustration is not abolition but reform. The process frameworks need to be stripped back to their essential purpose: supporting decisions, managing risk, and maintaining accountability. Everything else — the templates for their own sake, the reporting for reporting's sake, the governance theatre that adds delay without adding insight — should be challenged, justified, or removed.

This is harder than it sounds. It requires organisations to distinguish between process that serves a purpose and process that serves a bureaucracy — and to accept that much of what they currently do falls into the latter category. It requires PMOs to redefine their value away from compliance enforcement and toward decision support. It requires

programme managers to exercise the judgement that the methods themselves demand: the judgement to tailor, to simplify, to focus on what matters.

Most of all, it requires a willingness to trust experienced practitioners to apply the method intelligently rather than mandating that they follow it mechanically. The difference between discipline and bureaucracy is, in the end, the difference between judgement and obedience. Genuine process discipline is built on the former. What we have too often created is built on the latter.

The answer is not less process. It is better process — purpose-driven, context-sensitive, and relentlessly focused on the outcomes that justify the investment in the first place.