

BEYOND ANTI-PROCESS

The Benefits of Process — What Genuine Discipline Actually Looks Like When the Textbooks Close

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Difference Between Process as Bureaucracy and Process as Craft



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The Case That Needs Making

There is a fashionable argument circulating in programme and portfolio circles at the moment, and it goes roughly like this: process is the enemy. Governance is overhead. Templates are bureaucracy. The real work happens despite the methodology, not because of it.

It is a seductive argument, and it contains a kernel of truth. There are organisations drowning in process — filling templates nobody reads, attending gates that decide nothing, producing reports that inform no one. The critique is not unfounded.

But it is dangerously incomplete. And in the rush to condemn process orthodoxy, there is a risk of losing something genuinely valuable — the kind of discipline that does not announce itself, does not require a methodology manual, and does not generate impressive-looking documentation, but without which complex portfolios quietly fall apart.

The Distinction Most People Miss

The conversation about process in portfolio management suffers from a failure to distinguish between two fundamentally different things.

The first is process as compliance — the mandated templates, the stage gates, the governance frameworks, the certification requirements. This is process as an external imposition: something the organisation requires people to do, enforced through audit and escalation. It is visible, measurable, and frequently counterproductive. It is also what most people mean when they complain about process.

The second is process as discipline — the habits of thought and practice that experienced practitioners bring to complex work. This is process as an internal capability: the instinct to ask what the dependencies are before committing to a plan, to test assumptions before building on them, to maintain a clear line of sight between activity and outcome. It is largely invisible, difficult to measure, and absolutely essential.

The organisations that get process right are the ones where the discipline is invisible — embedded in how people think, not in what they are required to fill in. The template is not the discipline; it is, at best, a prompt for the thinking that constitutes the discipline. When the template becomes the end rather than the means, process has failed — but the failure is in the implementation, not the concept.

What Genuine Discipline Looks Like

In my experience, the portfolios that deliver consistently share a set of practices that are rarely written down in any methodology manual. They are not glamorous. They do not generate frameworks or acronyms. But they work.

Ruthless clarity about what is actually decided. Every meeting ends with someone stating, plainly, what was decided and who is responsible for what by when. Not what was discussed — what was decided. This sounds trivial. It is not. The majority of governance meetings I have observed end with participants holding different understandings of what was agreed. The discipline of forcing clarity is unglamorous but transformative.

Honest dependency mapping. Not the elaborate Gantt charts that planning tools produce, but a genuine, continuously updated understanding of what depends on what and where the real critical path lies. The best portfolio managers I have worked with carry this map in their heads and update it constantly through conversation, not through tools. The tool is a record of the thinking, not a substitute for it.

Early escalation of the uncomfortable. Disciplined portfolio teams surface problems when they are small and manageable, not when they have become crises. This requires a culture where raising a concern is valued rather than punished — which is itself a process achievement, though it looks nothing like what the methodology textbooks describe.

Proportionate governance. The most effective portfolios I have observed apply governance with discrimination — heavy oversight for high-risk, high-complexity initiatives; light touch for well-understood, lower-risk work. The undisciplined approach, by contrast, applies the same governance weight to everything, which overloads the high-risk items with bureaucracy and wastes effort on the low-risk ones.

Why This Matters Now

The anti-process movement, for all its justified frustrations, risks throwing away the discipline with the bureaucracy. If the response to process overreach is to dismantle governance structures wholesale, the result will not be agile, liberated delivery — it will be chaos dressed in the language of empowerment.

Portfolios are complex. They involve interdependencies, competing priorities, scarce resources, and uncertain outcomes. Managing them well requires discipline — not the discipline of templates and stage gates, but the discipline of clear thinking, honest communication, and rigorous follow-through. That discipline is a skill, not a procedure. It is learned through practice, not through certification. And it is the thing that separates the portfolios that deliver from the ones that merely report.

The textbooks will not teach you this, because it cannot be reduced to a process map. But it is the most important kind of process there is.