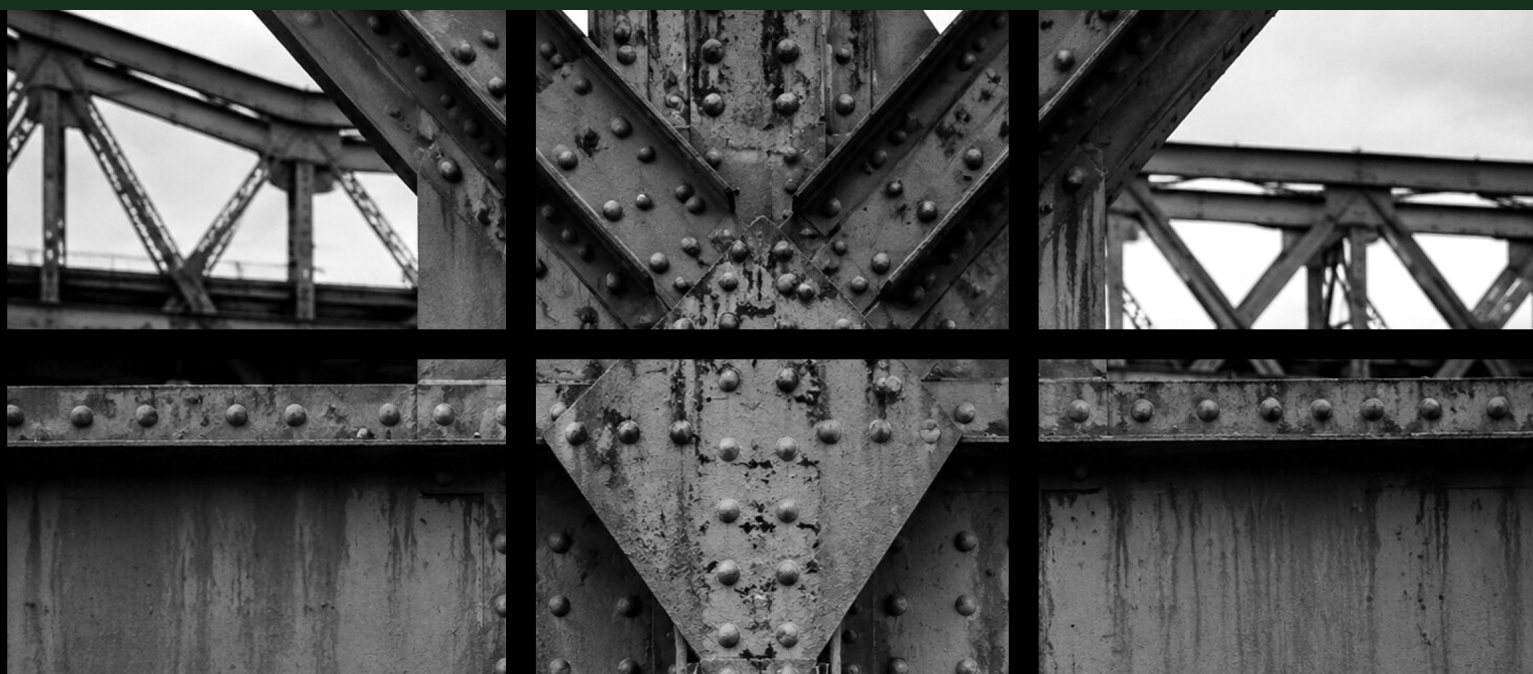


BEYOND THE MATURITY SCORE

The ITIL Orthodoxy Trap — When Process Maturity Becomes Process Paralysis

A Practitioner's Perspective on Framework Adoption in Enterprise IT



Giovanni Leonardi

April 2007

The ITIL Orthodoxy Trap – When Process Maturity Becomes Process Paralysis

Programme · No. 76

Originally written April 2007 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

“The organisation that scores highest on the maturity assessment is frequently the one least able to respond when the business actually needs something done.”

The Comfort of the Checklist

There is a particular kind of organisational confidence that comes from having adopted ITIL. It is the confidence of the fully documented, the thoroughly process-mapped, the comprehensively certified. It is also, increasingly, a confidence disconnected from the ability to deliver anything of consequence.

Across the programmes I observe, a pattern has become unmistakable. The organisations that have invested most heavily in ITIL adoption, PRINCE2 certification, and PMO framework maturity are not, as one might expect, the ones delivering change most effectively. They are frequently the ones delivering it most slowly – and with the least awareness that they are doing so.

This is not an argument against process. Process matters. Governance matters. The question is what happens when the adoption of a framework becomes the objective, rather than what the framework was meant to enable.

The Maturity Trap

The mechanism is straightforward, and it operates in plain sight. An organisation decides to adopt ITIL, or to achieve a particular P3M3 maturity level, or to standardise all programme delivery on PRINCE2. These are reasonable ambitions. The difficulty begins when the programme of adoption takes on a life of its own.

Certification targets are set. Training programmes are rolled out. Process documentation is produced – volumes of it. Compliance is measured. Dashboards are created to track the percentage of staff who have completed their PRINCE2 Practitioner qualification, the number of services catalogued, the completeness of configuration management databases.

What is not measured – because it is harder to measure – is whether any of this activity has made the organisation more capable of delivering the changes the business requires. The maturity score goes up. The delivery velocity does not.

Process as Insulation

The deeper problem is that framework orthodoxy provides a defence against accountability. When a programme runs late, the answer is not that the governance model is too heavy, the approval chain too long, or the change advisory board meeting too infrequent. The answer is that the process was not followed correctly – that the solution is more process, better compliance, tighter controls.

This is a closed loop, and it is remarkably difficult to break. The people who built the process framework are now the people who assess whether the process framework is working. Their assessment criteria are process-based. By their own measures, they are succeeding.

Meanwhile, business sponsors wait. Requirements age. Windows of opportunity close. The programme board receives a green status report – the RAG is measured against milestones that were re-baselined three months ago – and the uncomfortable truth that the organisation's process maturity and its delivery capability are moving in opposite directions goes unspoken.

What Maturity Actually Looks Like

Genuine process maturity is not measured by the completeness of a procedure manual or the number of certified practitioners on the payroll. It is visible in something far simpler: the organisation's ability to make a decision and act on it within a timeframe that matters.

The organisation that scores highest on the maturity assessment is frequently the one least able to respond when the business actually needs something done. It has optimised for auditability, not for action. It has built an apparatus of governance that can demonstrate compliance with any framework an assessor might require, while the programmes that apparatus governs drift quietly sideways.

This is the orthodoxy trap: the belief that adopting the framework is the transformation, rather than a means of supporting one. Until organisations learn to distinguish between the two, their investment in process maturity will continue to deliver precisely what it is designed to deliver – mature processes – and nothing more.