

BEYOND THE STATUS REPORT

The Meeting That Decided Nothing

A Practitioner's Perspective on Programme Governance in Complex Organisations



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What We Call Governance

Every complex programme has one. It may be called a steering committee, a programme board, an oversight group — the label shifts by house style — but the ritual is identical everywhere. Once a month a table fills with senior people. A pack circulates, thick enough that no one has read it end to end. A status slide appears, the traffic lights lean green, and the two ambers arrive with a reassuring sentence about mitigation already underway. Three questions are asked. The programme manager answers them. The coffee cools. The meeting closes on time, and everyone leaves with the comfortable sense that the programme is being governed.

It is not. It is being watched.

I have sat in a great many of these rooms, on both sides of the table, and the pattern that recurs is not incompetence. The people are able. The papers are professionally produced. The failing is structural, and it is this: the committee receives, but it does not decide. A body that only absorbs information is not a steering mechanism. It is an audience.

The Tell

There is a simple test I now apply to any governance forum, and it exposes the hollow ones within a single sitting. Ask of the last three meetings: what did this group decide that the programme could not have decided for itself?

If the honest answer is nothing — if every item was noted, received, or endorsed, and not one was actually chosen between live alternatives — then the committee steered nothing. It ratified. Ratification feels like governance because it wears the same clothes: the seniority, the minutes, the sense of occasion. But ratification is what happens after the steering has already occurred somewhere else — usually in a corridor, usually by one or two people, and usually without the accountability the forum was built to provide.

The symptoms are consistent across sectors:

- Packs that grow thicker as confidence falls, on the unspoken theory that volume is a substitute for judgement.
- Status reported in colours rather than choices, so that amber becomes a place to hide rather than a call to act.
- Attendance by delegation — the named member sends a deputy who can explain but cannot commit — so the one thing a board exists to do, bind the organisation to a decision, quietly becomes impossible.

- A standing agenda with no standing question. The group reviews progress but is never asked the only question that matters: what are we choosing this month, and what are we giving up in order to choose it?

Why It Persists

None of this survives because leaders are foolish. It survives because a decision-making forum is uncomfortable and a reporting forum is not. Deciding means someone is on record choosing A over B, and being wrong is now attributable to a name. Receiving a report commits no one. And under the governance expectations many of us now work within – the tightening scrutiny of boards since Sarbanes-Oxley, the audit committee's lengthening reach into programme risk – the appearance of oversight has never been more in demand. Appearance is cheapest to manufacture as a well-formatted pack. So the incentives pull quietly the wrong way: towards more reporting and less deciding, towards thicker evidence that governance occurred and thinner evidence that it changed anything.

A steering committee earns its name only in the moments it changes the programme's direction. Everything else it does – however senior, however carefully minuted – is spectating.

What Would Change It

The remedy is not a better template. It is a change in what the forum is for. Three shifts, none of them requiring a single new tool:

1. Put a decision at the top of every agenda. Not a review – a choice, framed as options with consequences, that the group must actually make in the room. If there is genuinely no decision to take this month, the meeting can be shorter; but the discipline of asking forces the real ones to the surface instead of leaving them to be settled in the corridor.
2. Make members commit, not attend. A board seat should carry the authority to bind the function it represents. If the person in the chair cannot say yes on behalf of their part of the organisation, they are the wrong person – and the deputy who "will take it back" is a decision deferred, which is to say a decision the programme will end up taking alone.
3. Minute the decisions, not the discussion. A useful record of a steering committee is a short list of what was chosen, by whom, and what was rejected. If the minutes read as a narrative of who said what, the group is documenting a conversation, not exercising governance.

None of this is difficult. That is rather the point. The steering committee that steers nothing is not defeated by complexity; it is defeated by the quiet institutional preference for the comfortable meeting over the accountable one. The programmes I have seen come through their worst months intact are almost always the ones whose boards were willing to be uncomfortable on schedule.