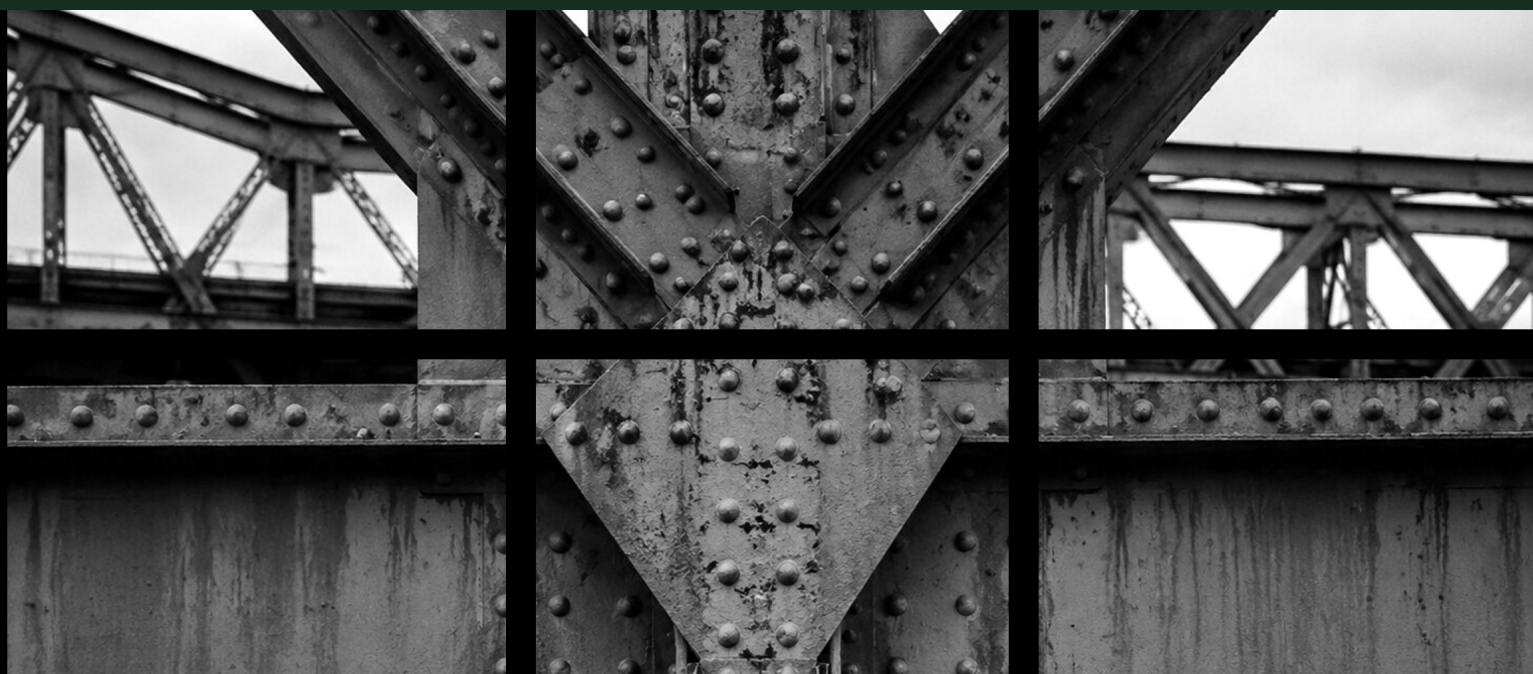


BEYOND REPORTING

The PMO Reporting Factory Persists Because Organisations Prefer Evidence of Control to the Burden of Decision

A reflection on how programme offices became fluent in producing information while authority remained elsewhere



Giovanni Leonardi

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The PMO Reporting Factory Persists Because Organisations Prefer Evidence of Control to the Burden of Decision

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1. Executive Summary

By November 2006, the programme office had perfected a familiar performance. On Thursday afternoon, workstream leads submitted their updates. On Friday morning, eleven people reconciled dates, costs, risks and dependencies across seventeen projects. By Monday, a 320-page pack was ready for the programme board. It contained traffic lights, milestone charts, budget movements, risk summaries, action logs and carefully compressed explanations of delay.

The pack was accurate enough to survive challenge. It was also almost useless as an instrument of decision.

Three issues had remained unresolved for six weeks. A supplier dispute was blocking an integration test. Two business units were refusing to agree which process would become standard. A benefits assumption depended on closing a site that no executive wanted to name. Each issue appeared in the pack, each had an owner in a column, and each was discussed. Yet the board asked for further analysis, revised dates and a cleaner statement of impact. The programme office left with more reporting work and no more authority than it had brought into the room.

This composite scene is not an argument against discipline. The figures mattered. The dependencies were real. The board could not responsibly govern without reliable information. The deeper question is why the machinery for producing information became so much stronger than the machinery for acting on it.

The answer is uncomfortable because it does not sit within the PMO alone. The reporting factory persists because it serves a wider organisational preference: evidence of control without the exposure of deciding.

Reporting becomes a factory when the organisation can demand information without accepting responsibility for what it reveals.

2. How the office inherited the wrong problem

The programme management office is often described as if its identity were a design choice. Senior leaders can supposedly choose between an administrative PMO, a controlling PMO and a strategic PMO, then recruit the right people and install the right processes. In practice, the office rarely begins with that freedom. It inherits the anxieties

of the programme around it.

When delivery is fragmented, leaders ask for a single view. When forecasts conflict, finance asks for reconciliation. When suppliers disagree, commercial teams ask for a common record. When assurance is nervous, the board asks for more evidence. These are legitimate demands. Someone must bring coherence to the programme's account of itself.

But each demand arrives as a request for an artefact rather than a decision. A consolidated plan can be commissioned without settling who may trade scope for time. A risk register can be improved without deciding which risks the organisation will tolerate. A benefits report can be requested without giving anyone authority over the operational changes on which the benefits depend. The PMO becomes responsible for the visibility of contradictions that others remain free not to resolve.

That asymmetry shapes the office. Work that produces a visible object is easy to assign, measure and audit. Work that improves judgement is harder to specify. A report has a deadline and a recipient. A better decision depends on the quality of the question, the presence of the right authority and the willingness to accept consequence. Under pressure, organisations naturally fund the former and merely hope for the latter.

The result is not simply bureaucracy. It is a rational response to an irrational distribution of accountability. The office expands around the work it is permitted to do.

3. Information is safer than authority

A reporting factory offers political safety to almost everyone involved.

For the programme director, a comprehensive pack demonstrates grip. For the sponsor, it shows that scrutiny is occurring. For finance, it creates traceability between forecast and approved case. For assurance, it provides an evidence trail. For workstream leads, it records that problems were raised. For the PMO, it proves that the cycle was completed. Each participant receives something valuable, even when the programme receives no decision.

That value explains why poor reporting alone cannot account for the pattern. Many reporting factories are competent. Their data can be carefully controlled, their timetables reliable and their packs professionally produced. The problem is not that they fail at reporting. It is that success at reporting disguises failure elsewhere.

A board can review ten red risks and appear diligent while leaving all ten untouched. A sponsor can demand a recovery plan while withholding the choice needed to make recovery possible. A project can move from green to amber to red in a disciplined sequence, giving the organisation a perfect record of deterioration. The very accuracy of the record lends respectability to delay.

This is why adding more senior PMO staff does not automatically change the office's role. If decision rights remain outside the function, experienced people become more accomplished translators of indecision. They improve the analysis, sharpen the commentary and make the consequences clearer. Yet clarity without authority may only make avoidance more sophisticated.

*“The strongest reporting system can document a failure that
no governing body was prepared to prevent.”*

4. The textbook promise and the lived bargain

The formal promise of programme governance is straightforward. Information should enable choices about scope, resources, sequencing, risk and benefits. The programme board should resolve matters beyond the authority of delivery teams. The PMO should create the conditions for those decisions by maintaining an integrated view and ensuring that consequences are visible.

The lived bargain is different. The organisation asks the PMO to absorb complexity so that senior forums do not have to experience it directly. Conflicting plans are reconciled into one date. Uncertain estimates are converted into a range, then often into a single number. Disagreements about readiness become a colour. Competing accounts of progress are compressed into a sentence.

Compression is necessary. No board can consume the raw detail of a large programme. But compression always involves judgement. The moment the PMO chooses which variance to foreground, which dependency to escalate or which confidence level to attach to a forecast, it is doing more than administration. It is interpreting the programme.

Organisations often depend on this interpretation while refusing to recognise it as such. They want the PMO to be authoritative but not to exercise authority; challenging but not disruptive; independent but responsive to the director whose progress it reports. The office is expected to tell the truth while remaining neutral about the decisions the truth requires.

This bargain protects the hierarchy. If the PMO is merely a reporting service, uncomfortable messages can be treated as data-quality issues. If it is a decision engine, those messages become demands on named leaders. The distinction is therefore not semantic. It determines where consequence lands.

5. Why the pattern survives reform

Reporting-heavy PMOs are repeatedly redesigned. New templates replace old ones. Enterprise planning systems promise one version of the truth. Reporting calendars are tightened. Definitions of red, amber and green are standardised. Staff receive training in programme controls. Yet the same factory often reappears with better equipment.

It survives because reform begins with the supply of information rather than the demand for decisions.

Consider a programme that reduced its monthly pack from 240 pages to 42. The redesign was celebrated as a move toward executive focus. But the board still had no agreed thresholds for intervention, no explicit time limit for unresolved cross-business issues, and no rule for who could change the benefits case. The pack became shorter; the meeting did not become more decisive. The PMO then created supplementary papers for issues that could not fit the new format. Within three months, total preparation time had returned to its previous level.

The lesson is not that concise reporting fails. It is that information design cannot compensate for governance design. A one-page dashboard can be as ceremonial as a 300-page pack if no one knows what action each signal should trigger.

Tools reinforce the pattern because they make production visible. It is easy to show that every project submitted on time, every field was completed and every milestone had a baseline. It is much harder to demonstrate that a board asked the right question early enough. The measurable activity crowds out the less measurable contribution.

Professional identity also matters. People recruited into PMOs are often selected for organisation, accuracy, persistence and the ability to impose order. Those qualities are essential. Yet the office may then punish the behaviours needed to become a decision engine: challenging an implausible assumption, refusing to publish a meaningless aggregate, exposing a conflict between sponsors, or saying that a date cannot be made credible until a choice is made. The PMO is praised for control and criticised when control becomes confrontation.

6. The strongest case for the reporting PMO

There is a serious opposing view. Large programmes fail when basic information is unreliable. Before asking a PMO to shape decisions, an organisation may need it to establish elementary discipline. Plans must connect. Costs must reconcile. Risks must be expressed consistently. Suppliers must report against comparable milestones. Without these foundations, strategic language can become an excuse for weak control.

This objection is right. A PMO that aspires to influence while neglecting accuracy is dangerous. Decision forums cannot act responsibly on inconsistent data, and programme leaders cannot substitute instinct for an integrated picture. The administrative core is not beneath the strategic role; it is what makes the strategic role credible.

There is also value in repetition. A regular reporting cycle forces delivery teams to confront variance. Common definitions prevent every project from inventing its own meaning of progress. Historical records allow leaders to distinguish a sudden problem from a deteriorating trend. In a programme involving multiple suppliers and business units, disciplined reporting may be the only shared language available.

The error lies in treating this foundation as the finished institution.

Accurate reporting is necessary in the same way that reliable instruments are necessary in a cockpit. The instruments do not decide the destination, allocate fuel among competing journeys or determine which risk the organisation will accept. Nor does their accuracy excuse the crew from acting. A PMO becomes valuable when it connects reliable evidence to a governing choice.

The strongest defence of reporting discipline therefore strengthens, rather than weakens, the case for a decision engine. If the organisation invests heavily in truth, it should also invest in the capacity to respond to truth.

7. What a decision engine actually does

The phrase “decision engine” can sound grander than the work itself. It does not mean transferring sponsorship to the PMO or allowing analysts to overrule accountable

executives. It means designing the office around the movement from evidence to choice.

That movement begins before the board meeting. A decision-oriented PMO distinguishes between information, an issue and a decision. Information describes a condition. An issue identifies a condition that threatens an agreed outcome. A decision specifies the choice, the authority required, the latest useful date and the consequences of each credible option. Without that translation, escalation merely moves anxiety upward.

The office also manages decision latency. It records not only when an issue was raised but how long the organisation has allowed it to remain unresolved. It shows the cost of waiting, because delay is itself a choice even when no minute records it as one. A two-week deferral may consume contingency, weaken a commercial position or make a later option impossible. These consequences belong in the governing conversation.

A decision engine links forums. Matters should not circulate between project reviews, design groups, commercial meetings and the programme board simply because each forum can discuss them but none owns them. The PMO traces the route of authority and identifies the point at which escalation has become evasion.

It also protects the integrity of the programme narrative. When one workstream claims progress by moving an obligation to another, the integrated view must show the transfer rather than celebrate the local improvement. When a supplier milestone is achieved but business readiness is not, the programme should not confuse contractual completion with usable capability. When benefits rely on an operational change that has no owner, the absence must be reported as a governance defect, not a future action.

These practices require judgement, but not unaccountable power. The PMO frames the choice; the authorised leader makes it. The office records the basis, the owner and the consequence. Its authority comes from the transparency of the process, not from quietly acquiring the sponsor's role.

8. The people question hidden inside the process question

Changing the work changes the people the office needs and the way their contribution is judged.

A reporting factory rewards speed, completeness and conformance. A decision engine still needs those qualities, but it also needs synthesis, institutional courage and an understanding of how commercial, operational and technical choices interact. Staff must be able to recognise when apparent data disagreement is really a conflict of interest, when a schedule problem is really an authority problem, and when a risk has been repeatedly restated because nobody will accept its implication.

This does not require every PMO analyst to become a strategist. It requires a deliberate division of labour. Some roles maintain data integrity and planning discipline. Others integrate across workstreams, prepare decisions and test the programme's governing logic. Senior PMO leadership must connect the two, so interpretation remains grounded in evidence and control work remains connected to purpose.

The career path matters. If the most reliable people are kept indefinitely in pack production because the cycle depends on them, the office teaches that competence leads to deeper administration. If advancement depends on proximity to senior meetings rather than quality of judgement, it creates a different distortion. The aim is not to elevate one kind of work over another, but to make the chain of value explicit.

The same principle applies to capacity. In the composite programme, eleven PMO staff spent 68 per cent of their time collecting, reconciling and formatting information. A review found that twenty-seven matters had been escalated more than once, yet only six had been presented as explicit choices with a named decision-maker and a deadline. The immediate response might be to automate data collection. That would help, but it would not by itself produce better decisions. Freed capacity must be deliberately reassigned to integration, challenge and decision preparation, or the organisation will simply ask for more reports.

9. From meeting support to governing memory

The PMO's most important asset may be neither the plan nor the dashboard, but memory.

Programmes outlast particular arguments. Sponsors change, suppliers rotate, assumptions fade and decisions are retold in forms that suit the present dispute. A strong office preserves the link between a choice, the evidence available at the time and the consequence that followed. This is not clerical minute-taking. It is the programme's institutional memory of judgement.

Such memory changes behaviour. Leaders are less likely to defer repeatedly when the cumulative cost of deferral is visible. Workstreams are less able to reopen settled questions without presenting new evidence. Benefits cannot be quietly detached from the operational commitments on which they were approved. The programme learns, not because every decision was correct, but because its reasoning can be examined.

A reporting factory records what happened. A decision engine also records why the organisation chose to let it happen.

10. The choice belongs above the PMO

It is tempting to conclude that PMO leaders should simply become bolder. Some should. They can refuse pointless duplication, redesign packs around decisions, expose unresolved authority and measure the age of escalations. They can ask, before accepting a new report, what decision it will inform and who has agreed to make it.

But courage inside the office cannot repair cowardice above it.

A PMO cannot appoint an absent sponsor, resolve a conflict that executives prefer to preserve, or make accountable a board that treats every consequence as a request for further detail. If senior leaders continue to reward exhaustive reporting while postponing difficult choices, the office will follow the incentives. Its factory is the visible symptom of a governing system that wants certainty before commitment and distance from consequence.

The transformation therefore begins with a different contract. The board must define which decisions belong where, what evidence is sufficient, how quickly critical choices must be made and what happens when authority is not exercised. The programme director must protect challenge rather than treating it as disloyalty. Assurance must examine decision quality and latency, not only document completeness. The PMO must be held accountable for the clarity and integrity of choices, while sponsors remain accountable for making them.

None of this eliminates reporting. It gives reporting a destination.

The enduring question is not whether the PMO is administrative or strategic. That classification places too much attention on the office and too little on the organisation it serves. The sharper question is whether programme governance uses information to confront consequence or to postpone it.

Where leaders genuinely want decisions, the PMO can become an engine: disciplined, interpretive and connected to authority. Where leaders want only evidence that the programme is being watched, the factory will persist. It may become leaner, faster and more technologically accomplished. It will still be producing the appearance of control for a system unwilling to exercise it.