

BEYOND SPONSOR DEPENDENCE

# The PMO That Dies With Its Sponsor

Why the office that governs every programme has no constituency of its own



# The PMO That Dies With Its Sponsor

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*“What determines whether an office survives its sponsor's departure is not how well it worked, but whether anyone other than the departed sponsor had a reason to keep it.”*

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## The ninety-day clock

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Ninety days is the usual figure. A new director of change arrives, inherits an organisation they did not build, and within a quarter the programme office that served their predecessor is gone — folded back into “the line”, its people redeployed, its standing meetings quietly dropped from the calendar. I have watched this happen to offices that were, by any fair measure, doing good work. One had been named the group's project office of the year eleven weeks before it was dissolved; the certificate was still on the wall when the redundancy conversations began.

We tend to explain these deaths one at a time. This one was too bureaucratic. That one never proved its value. The new director simply had a different philosophy. Each explanation is plausible on its own, and each misses the fact that the same thing happens almost everywhere, to almost every kind of office, on almost the same timetable. When a pattern is that consistent, the individual excuses are not the cause. The cause is structural. The programme office is disbanded after a leadership change not because it failed, but because of what it was built to be — an extension of one person's authority. And authority does not transfer.

## Whose office is it, really?

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It is worth remembering why so many of these offices exist in the first place. The last few years have been good ones for the programme office as an idea. The collapse of the technology boom left boards asking hard questions about what their project spend had actually bought; the compliance climate that followed — the audit trails, the control frameworks, the appetite for gateway reviews and documented sign-off — rewarded anyone who could impose visible order on a sprawling portfolio. Standing up an office to govern the work became the obvious answer. But an office created to reassure a board and serve a sponsor is, by its very origins, a creature of that sponsor. It was never designed to outlast them.

Consider what a programme office actually is in most organisations. It exists because a senior figure — a CIO, a transformation director, a finance director sponsoring a portfolio of change — needed a way to see and control a body of work too large to hold in one head. So they stood one up: to collect the reports, run the gateway reviews, chase the milestones, keep the risk log, and package it all into something that could go to the board with confidence. The office draws its authority entirely from that single relationship. Its mandate is the sponsor's mandate; its access is the sponsor's access. When people comply with its requests — and programme-office requests are, let us be honest, rarely welcomed

— they comply because they understand whose office it really is.

Now change the sponsor. The new leader owes nothing to the arrangement. What felt, to the outgoing director, like an instrument of control feels to the incoming one like inherited overhead: a standing cost with someone else's fingerprints on it, staffed by people who owe their loyalty to a regime that has just ended. There is no constituency to defend it, because it never built one. It reported on everyone's work and owned none of it; it made demands of every programme and delivered a decision to none of them. Ask the programme managers whether they will lobby to keep the office and you will get, at best, a shrug. It spent three years auditing them. Why would they mourn it?

*An office that reports on everyone's work but owns none of it has no natural defenders. When the sponsor leaves, so does the only reason anyone ever complied.*

## The uncomfortable defence

There is a serious objection to all of this, and it deserves to be met head-on rather than waved away. Perhaps the office gets disbanded because it should be. Perhaps the ninety-day cull is the organisation working exactly as it ought to — a new leader with fresh eyes seeing overhead for what it is and cutting it. Anyone who has worked around these functions for long has seen the self-licking version: the office that generates process for its own sake, that treats compliance with its own templates as though it were progress, that adds headcount while the projects it oversees keep failing at the same rate as before. The surveys that circulate at conferences — half of all programme offices closed within a few years of being established — point the same way. Maybe the market is simply clearing. Maybe a good office would not get cut.

I have some sympathy for this, and any honest practitioner should. Plenty of the offices I have seen dissolved were not doing good work, and some were exactly the reporting factories the sceptics describe. But the argument proves too little. If disbandment tracked performance, the good offices would survive the change at the top and the weak ones would fall. That is not what happens. The award-winning office and the box-ticking one are cut with the same speed, because the trigger is not performance. The trigger is association. What determines whether an office survives its sponsor's departure is not how well it worked, but whether anyone other than the departed sponsor had a reason to keep it. Almost always, nobody did.

## The offices that live

The programme offices that survive a change at the top have one thing in common, and it is not maturity, tooling, or the polish of their reporting. It is that each had made itself the owner of a decision the organisation could not easily take back in-house.

This is a real distinction, not a rhetorical one. A reporting office produces a view of the work; a decision-owning office produces a call the business then acts on. The first is a convenience — pleasant to have, painless to remove. The second is load-bearing. Pull it out and something the organisation depends on stops happening.

| Dimension                              | The reporting office        | The decision-owning office                     |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Where its authority comes from         | Delegated by one sponsor    | Vested in a decision the business relies on    |
| What it actually produces              | A status pack for the board | A funding or prioritisation call others act on |
| Its relationship to the programmes     | It audits them              | It allocates to them                           |
| Who defends it when the sponsor leaves | No one                      | Everyone who depends on the call it makes      |

The difference is not cosmetic, and a single figure makes it concrete. One organisation I have in mind ran its entire change portfolio — some £40m of annual spend across roughly twenty programmes — through a quarterly prioritisation that the programme office facilitated and, in every practical sense, owned. It held the benefits numbers finance had learned to trust, and the single view of who was working on what across a fixed delivery capacity. When the sponsoring executive left, the incoming one worked out within a fortnight that dissolving the office meant personally taking on a twenty-programme trade-off they did not yet understand, against a hard capacity limit, with every programme director lobbying them directly. The office survived — not because the new leader admired it, but because cutting it created an immediate and visible problem for them. That is the only kind of safety a programme office ever really has.

### Building for a succession you cannot see

The lesson for anyone standing up or running a programme office is an uncomfortable one, because it cuts against the instinct of the role. The instinct is to serve the sponsor — to be the trusted instrument of the person who created you, responsive and loyal and endlessly accommodating. That instinct is precisely what gets the office killed, because it binds the office's life to a single career. The discipline is the opposite: to spend the sponsor's patronage, while you have it, on buying independence from it. Take ownership of a decision. Become the place where the funding trade-off is genuinely made, where the benefits numbers are genuinely believed, where the contest for scarce delivery capacity is genuinely resolved. Make the office into something the organisation would have to rebuild the morning after it dissolved you.

We talk about programme offices as though their problem were maturity — as though one more level on the model, one more accredited practitioner, one more integrated toolset would finally settle the question of their worth. It will not. Survival was never a maturity question; it was always a political one, and the politics are decided long before the new leader arrives — in whether the office made itself needed by someone who would still be in the building after the sponsor had gone. The offices that ask that question early, and act on the answer while they still have the standing to, are the ones left on their feet when the ninety days are up.