

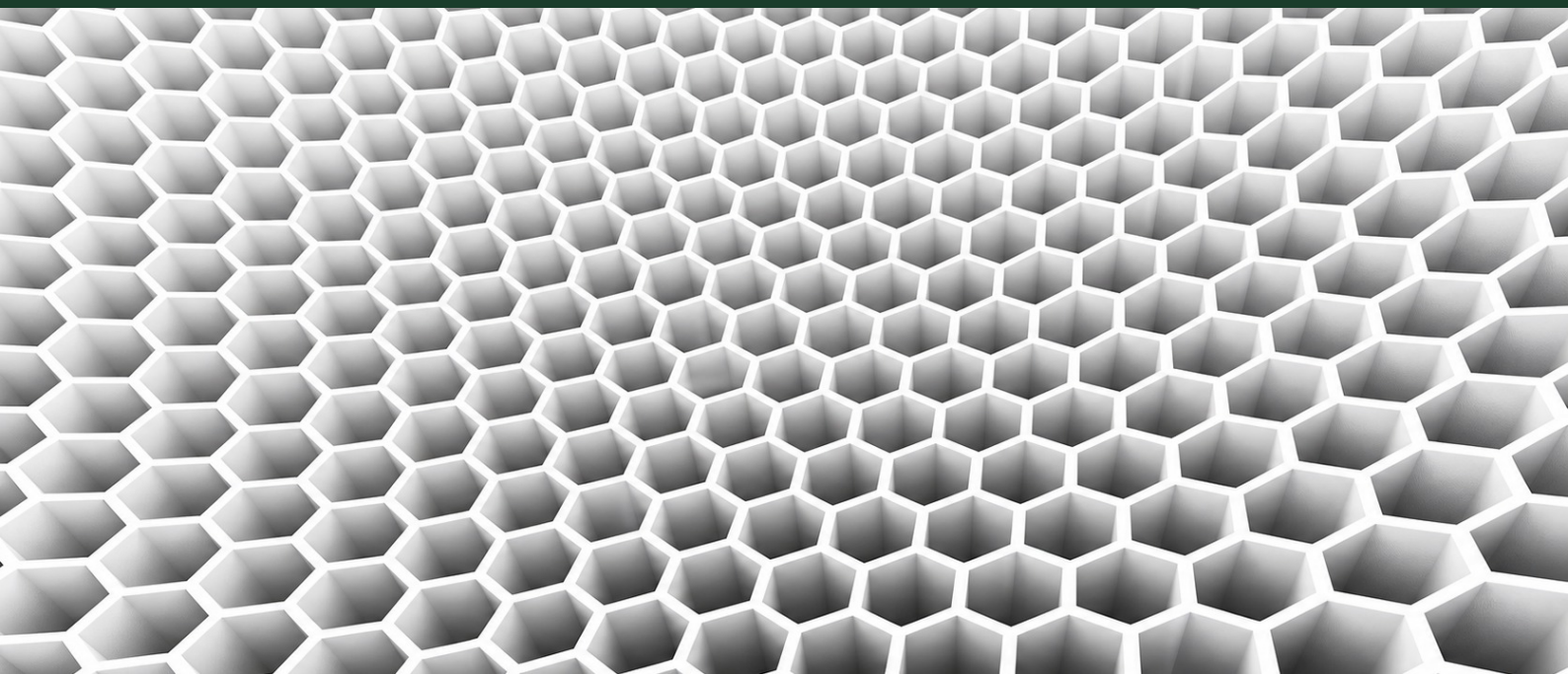
BEYOND THE WEBINAR

The Programme No One Chartered

A Practitioner's Perspective on Wellbeing as Programme Scope

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“The mental health programme that every organisation needed this year is the one none of them had ever chartered.”

The dependency that never made the plan

Every programme carries a risk register, and every risk register I have read over the past decade carries the same blind spot. We log the risks to the plan — the vendor who slips a milestone, the integration that fails its first pass through test, the approval that stalls in a steering committee for six weeks. We do not log the risk to the people carrying the plan. Their capacity to keep going is treated as a constant: a background condition the programme sits on, rather than a dependency the programme relies on.

This year has made that omission impossible to ignore. When offices emptied in the spring and delivery moved, almost overnight, into several thousand spare bedrooms and kitchen tables, the thing that decided whether a programme held together was not the technology and not the governance. It was whether the people running it were still standing by the autumn. And the fact I keep returning to is this: almost none of the organisations whose delivery I have watched this year had a programme for that. They had a continuity plan for the servers. They had nothing for the staff.

We had a recovery plan for every system in the estate and no recovery plan for the human beings those systems depended on.

The pattern is not new — the pandemic simply removed the slack that used to hide it. In an ordinary year the strain is absorbed by the office itself: the corridor conversation, the colleague who notices you have gone quiet, the natural boundary that closing a laptop and catching a train used to enforce. Strip those away in a single week, as this year did, and the wellbeing of a delivery team stops being a soft background concern and becomes the hardest dependency on the plan. The mental health programme that every organisation needed this year is the one none of them had ever chartered.

Why it fell outside the wire

Wellbeing did not go unnoticed because leaders did not care. It went unmanaged because of where it sat in the machinery. In every structure I have observed, wellbeing lived somewhere that guaranteed it would never be treated as delivery scope:

- It sat inside HR as an initiative or a benefit — the assistance line, the occupational health referral, the awareness week — rather than inside the programme as scope with a plan behind it.
- It had no sponsor who was accountable for delivery. A benefit with no owner competes for nobody's attention when the pressure comes on.
- It carried no benefits case expressed in terms the programme understood, so when resource was rationed — and this year it was rationed hard — wellbeing lost every argument to the things that had a business case attached.
- It was measured, if at all, through an annual engagement survey whose results arrived months too late to act on and were disconnected from anything happening on the actual plan.

Put those four together and you have a dependency that is critical to delivery, owned by no one accountable for delivery, funded by no one, and measured by no instrument that could see it failing in time to intervene. In programme terms, that is not a soft issue. That is an unmanaged single point of failure sitting underneath everything else.

What the year actually showed

Here is what I watched happen in the absence of a chartered programme. The wellbeing load did not disappear — critical dependencies never do. It was picked up, informally and invisibly, by individual managers who took it on themselves to hold their teams together. The check-in call that was not in anyone's method. The quiet reshuffling of work around a colleague who was clearly struggling. The manager who noticed, over a video call, that someone who used to speak up had stopped.

This was real work, and it kept programmes alive. But because it was never brought inside scope, it was done unevenly and at personal cost. Some teams happened to sit under a manager with the instinct and the capacity to carry it. Some did not. Wellbeing, this year, became a lottery decided by the temperament of the nearest line manager — and the managers who carried it best were often the ones quietly burning out themselves, because no one had scoped support for the people doing the supporting.

Refuse to bring a critical dependency inside governance and it does not go away — it simply gets done badly, at random, by whoever happens to care.

That is the real lesson of the year, and it is a structural one, not a sentimental one. We did not have a wellbeing problem this year because people were fragile. We had a wellbeing problem because we had left the single most load-bearing dependency in our programmes outside the plan, and then acted surprised when it behaved like every other unmanaged dependency does under stress.

Treating wellbeing as scope

If the reflection stops at we should be kinder, nothing changes, because kindness is not a control. The point of treating something as programme scope is that scope comes with the apparatus that makes a thing actually happen. Applied to wellbeing, that apparatus is not exotic:

1. Give it a named owner with delivery accountability — not a wellbeing champion with a lanyard, but someone whose objectives include the sustained capacity of the team to deliver.
2. Put it on the risk register as what it is: a dependency whose failure stops the plan. Rate it, review it, and escalate it in the same forum where you escalate everything else that can sink delivery.
3. Resource it honestly. A dependency with no budget is a wish. If holding a team together requires slower milestones, spare capacity, or fewer parallel workstreams, that is a cost of delivery, not a deduction from it.
4. Measure it with leading indicators you can act on — patterns in hours, in leave not taken, in people going quiet — rather than a survey that tells you last quarter how last quarter felt.

None of this requires a new discipline. It requires applying the discipline we already have — the one we apply without hesitation to systems and suppliers — to the people the whole enterprise rests on. We already know how to manage a critical dependency. We have simply refused to admit that this is one.

The reckoning that should follow

Every programme office will write a lessons-learned exercise for this year. The temptation, when they do, will be to file wellbeing under culture, note that people were resilient, thank everyone for their commitment, and move on. That would be the second failure, and a more culpable one than the first, because the first was a blind spot and the second would be a choice made with the evidence in hand.

The organisations that come out of this period stronger will not be the ones that ran the most webinars. They will be the ones that looked honestly at what actually held their delivery together this year, saw that it was the unscoped, unfunded, unmanaged effort of people improvising care under pressure, and decided to stop leaving that to chance. Wellbeing was always programme scope. It took a year like this one to make the omission visible. The question now is whether we charter the programme we needed — or wait for the next shock to teach us the same lesson twice.