

BEYOND ATTENDANCE

The Steering Committee That Steered Nothing

How the most senior meeting on a programme became its least consequential — and what a governance body must do to earn the name



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“Amber is the colour of deferral.”

1. The Meeting That Steered Nothing

The programme was fourteen months old, and the steering committee had met every month without fail. Eight people, most of them a rung or two below the executive board, gathered in the same room on the third Tuesday, worked through the same pack, and left having changed nothing. The pack was good. Someone in the programme office had clearly laboured over it: a summary slide with the overall status shown amber, a milestone plan with the critical path picked out, a risk log running to forty-odd open items, a finance page reconciling actuals to budget within a rounding error. The committee received it. They asked sharp questions. They noted the amber status with concern. And then they moved to the next item, and the meeting ended, and the programme carried on doing exactly what it would have done had the committee never convened.

I have sat in that room more times than I would like to admit, on both sides of the table, and the pattern is always the same: a body with every formal attribute of authority and almost none of its exercise. It has terms of reference. It has a quorum. It has minutes. What it does not have is the habit of deciding. It reviews, it notes, it escalates — occasionally — but the one thing a steering committee exists to do, which is to steer, it does not do. The wheel is in the room. Nobody's hands are on it.

2. Oversight Is Not the Same as Steering

There is a comfortable confusion at the heart of how we run programme governance, and it is worth naming precisely. We have folded two different functions into one meeting and then wondered why the meeting underperforms. The first function is assurance — satisfying senior stakeholders that the programme is under control, that the money is accounted for, that the risks are known. The second is direction — making the small number of consequential choices the delivery team cannot make on its own authority: the trade-offs between scope, cost and time; the go/no-go at a stage boundary; the decision to stop.

Assurance is retrospective. It looks at what has happened and asks whether it is acceptable. Direction is prospective. It looks at what must happen next and commits the organisation to a path. A steering committee that does only the first has quietly become an audit committee wearing the wrong badge. It is reviewing the programme rather than running it, and the distinction is not academic — it is the difference between a body that absorbs decisions and one that merely absorbs information.

A governance board earns the word steering only when the programme would visibly change course as a result of what happens in the room. If the same decisions would have been taken, at the same time, by the same people outside the meeting, the meeting is ceremony.

3. The Anatomy of a Committee That Does Not Decide

How does a group of capable, senior people end up presiding over a programme without directing it? Not through incompetence. The mechanism is more subtle, and it is worth setting out, because you cannot fix what you have only felt.

- The status report crowds out the decision. A well-built pack is a trap. Ninety minutes fills effortlessly with the walking-through of RAG statuses, milestone movements and risk logs, and the committee mistakes the thoroughness of the review for the substance of the meeting. Attention is a fixed budget; every minute spent being informed is a minute not spent deciding.
- Amber is a place to hide. Red forces a conversation; green closes one; amber does neither. A programme reported as amber for nine consecutive months is not being managed to a conclusion — it is being held in a state that requires no one to act. Amber is the colour of deferral.
- Nobody owns the decision, so everybody discusses it. When a genuine trade-off reaches the room without a named owner and a recommendation attached, it becomes a conversation rather than a decision. Eight senior people each add a consideration, the complexity mounts, and the safest available move — "let us take that offline" or "let us bring it back next month" — wins by default.
- Deferral has no visible cost. The one number that never appears on the pack is the cost of the decisions the committee did not take. A scope question left open across five meetings looks free. It is not.

That last point deserves a figure, because it is where the abstraction becomes real. On one core-systems replacement I watched from close range, a single unresolved question — whether to migrate two legacy products onto the new platform or retire them — sat on the steering committee's agenda from one meeting to the next, "pending further analysis," for the better part of half a year. Each month the programme kept building to accommodate both possibilities, because no one had told it not to. By the time the committee finally chose to retire the products, the hedging had cost something on the order of a million pounds in work that was immediately thrown away — not because the wrong decision was taken, but because the right one was taken six months late. The committee never saw that million pounds, because it never appeared on any slide. It was the invisible interest on a decision debt the committee had been quietly running up all along.

"The most expensive line in a programme's budget is rarely a bad decision. It is a good decision taken too slowly."

4. What Steering Actually Requires

If the diagnosis is that these bodies review when they should direct, the remedy is not another layer of process. It is a change in what the meeting is for, enforced by a few unglamorous disciplines.

1. Put decisions, not status, at the top of the agenda. The first item should be the list of choices the committee must make today — each with an owner, a recommendation and a deadline. Status reporting is necessary, but it belongs at the back of the pack, read in advance, referred to only when it bears on a decision. A committee that opens on the RAG summary will spend its energy there; a committee that opens on the decision list will spend its energy deciding.
1. Bring every decision pre-worked. A trade-off should arrive already framed: the options, the recommendation, the consequences of each path, and the cost of not choosing. The committee's job is to test and commit, not to originate. A decision that arrives raw will be deferred; a decision that arrives with a recommendation will, more often than not, be taken.
1. Make deferral cost something. When the committee chooses not to decide, the minutes should record what that delay costs — in money, in rework risk, in slipped benefit — and that figure should be carried forward and restated at the next meeting, growing. Decision debt, like any debt, changes behaviour only when the interest is made visible.
1. Track the decision rate, not only the delivery status. A healthy steering committee can point to the decisions it has made and the difference they made. If, after a year, the honest answer to "what has this committee decided?" is a short and thin list, that is the single most important status indicator on the programme — and it is the one that never appears on the standard dashboard.

Reviewing body	Steering body
Opens on status	Opens on decisions
Receives information	Commits to direction
Amber persists quietly	Amber forces a choice
Deferral is free	Deferral is costed and carried
Success is "on track"	Success is the right corrections, made in time

5. The Objection Worth Taking Seriously

There is a serious case on the other side, and it should not be waved away. A steering committee, the argument runs, exists to provide oversight and assurance — not to do the delivery organisation's job for it. If every trade-off is escalated to the committee, the programme has under-empowered its own leadership; a quiet steering committee, on this view, is the sign of a healthy programme, one whose delivery team is making the right calls at the right level and reserving the committee for the genuinely exceptional. Escalation should be rare. A committee that decides constantly is a committee whose programme cannot govern itself.

This is right about delegation and wrong about what follows from it. Of course most decisions should be taken below the committee; a programme that escalates everything has failed differently, but no less badly. The error is to read the committee's silence as evidence of health without checking which decisions the silence is swallowing. There is a world of difference between a committee that is quiet because the consequential choices are being made well at the right level, and one that is quiet because the consequential choices are being avoided at every level, the committee included. The first is delegation. The second is abdication dressed as delegation. The test is not how often the committee decides, but whether the decisions that genuinely require its authority — the cross-boundary trade-offs, the stage-gate commitments, the decision to stop — actually reach it and are actually resolved. A committee can be admirably restrained and still be steering nothing, if the questions it exists to answer are dying quietly one rung below it.

6. The Point of Being in the Room

Governance is the most over-specified and under-examined part of how we run large change. We have terms of reference, escalation paths, responsibility charts and reporting cadences in abundance. What we too rarely have is a plain accounting of whether the most senior meeting on the programme is changing the programme's direction or merely observing it.

The uncomfortable truth is that a steering committee cannot be assured into effectiveness by better packs or tighter minutes. Those things can, in fact, make it worse, by making the ceremony more satisfying. The committee that steers is not the one with the best dashboard. It is the one where, on the third Tuesday of the month, a real choice is put on the table, worked through, and closed — and the programme leaves the room pointed somewhere it was not pointed when it walked in. Everything else is attendance.