

BEYOND THE GROWTH ASSUMPTION

Value When Survival Is the Goal

A Practitioner's Perspective on What Value Means When Survival Is the Goal



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“A benefits framework built to measure growth cannot measure survival, because survival does not show up as a number that gets bigger — it shows up as a catastrophe that never arrives.”

1. The frameworks that stopped making sense overnight

I want to give an honest account of something that has been quietly troubling a great many people who run portfolios, and that few of us have been willing to say plainly: our benefits realisation frameworks stopped making sense some time last autumn, and we have mostly carried on using them anyway, because we had nothing to put in their place.

The frameworks I mean are the ones every mature organisation built during the good years. Each programme carried a benefits case. The case projected a stream of value — revenue uplift, cost reduction, productivity gain, market share — and the portfolio was governed by tracking realised benefits against that projection. It was a genuine advance on what came before. It forced sponsors to say what their programme was for in measurable terms, and it gave the portfolio a common currency in which competing initiatives could be compared. I defended these frameworks for years, and I would defend the discipline behind them still.

But every one of them rested on an assumption so deep that we never wrote it down, which is always the most dangerous kind. They assumed growth. They assumed that value meant more — more revenue, more efficiency, more capacity, more share — and that the organisation would still be there, in recognisable form, to collect it. When that assumption held, the frameworks worked. When it failed, last autumn, they did not gracefully degrade. They simply stopped describing the world we were in.

2. What we were actually measuring

Consider what a benefits framework does when the ground gives way. A programme was justified on a projected revenue uplift of some millions over three years. The market it was built to serve has now contracted by a third. The benefits case is not merely optimistic; it is measuring value in a currency — growth — that has ceased to exist for the duration. And yet the governance machine grinds on, dutifully reporting the programme as underperforming against its case, red-flagging it, and inviting the conclusion that it should be cut.

The pattern I observed across portfolios through the winter was that this machinery produced exactly the wrong decisions with perfect procedural correctness. Programmes were killed for failing to deliver growth benefits in a period when growth was impossible, while their real value — which had quietly become something else entirely — went unmeasured and therefore unweighted. Meanwhile other programmes continued to report healthy benefits against their cases precisely because their cases were built on cost reduction, and cost reduction was the one thing still happening, so they looked like the

portfolio's stars regardless of whether they were building anything the organisation would need on the other side.

A governance framework does not become neutral when its assumptions fail. It becomes actively misleading, because it keeps producing confident, precise, procedurally correct answers to a question the organisation has stopped asking.

This is the uncomfortable heart of it. We were not measuring value. We were measuring growth, and calling it value, and getting away with the substitution for as long as the two moved together. The moment they came apart, the framework kept faithfully tracking growth while the organisation's actual definition of value migrated somewhere the framework could not follow.

3. The redefinition nobody wanted to make

Where the definition of value migrated to was survival, and then, as the worst of the fear passed this spring, to resilience. But almost nobody said so out loud, and I think the reason is revealing.

To redefine value as survival is to admit that the entire apparatus of ambition the portfolio was built to serve has been suspended. It feels like defeat. The benefits case spoke the language of aspiration — of the organisation becoming more than it was. Survival speaks the language of endurance — of the organisation remaining what it is long enough for conditions to change. No sponsor wants to rewrite their programme's purpose from "deliver twelve million in uplift" to "ensure we are still here to have the argument next year." So we mostly did not rewrite the cases. We left them standing, increasingly fictional, and made the real decisions in the corridor, on instinct, outside the framework entirely.

That corridor decision-making is the honest account I promised. Through the winter, the portfolio decisions that actually mattered — what to protect, what to stop, what to strip to its core — were largely made outside the benefits framework, by senior people using judgement the framework could not encode. The framework was not steering. It was producing reports that everyone had quietly agreed to stop believing, while the steering happened somewhere the governance could not see. That is a dangerous state for a portfolio to be in, because judgement exercised in the corridor is judgement without a record, without challenge, and without the discipline that a framework, whatever its faults, imposes.

4. Value as survival, and the trouble with measuring it

So the question I have been wrestling with, and that I do not think any of us has fully answered, is whether value-as-survival can be measured at all — whether a portfolio can be governed on it, or whether survival is simply the condition under which governance is suspended and we wait for growth to return so the old frameworks can resume.

I have come to believe it can be measured, but only by inverting the logic of the benefits case, and the inversion is genuinely hard.

A benefits framework built to measure growth cannot measure survival, because survival does not show up as a number that gets bigger — it shows up as a catastrophe that never

arrives. The value of the programme that keeps a critical capability alive through the downturn is the disaster that did not happen, and disasters that do not happen are invisible to a framework built to count things that do. The value of resilience is optionality — the preserved ability to move quickly when conditions turn — and optionality is worth nothing on any measure until the moment it is worth everything.

- The growth framework asks: what more will this programme produce? The survival framework must ask: what does this programme prevent us from losing, and what future move does it keep open?
- The growth framework rewards the largest projected uplift. The survival framework must reward the capability whose loss would be irreversible — which is often unglamorous, cheap to run, and impossible to rebuild once gone.
- The growth framework measures realised benefit against a plan. The survival framework must measure preserved capacity against a threat, which means it can only ever be validated in hindsight, if the threat it guarded against actually arrives.

That last point is why measuring value-as-survival is so uncomfortable, and why so few of us have committed to it. It offers no clean quarterly number. It asks the portfolio to protect things whose value cannot be proven until a crisis worse than this one tests them, and to do so at the expense of programmes that can show a benefit today. It requires, in short, an act of judgement that the framework can inform but cannot make — and after years of building frameworks precisely so that we would not have to rely on unrecorded judgement, that feels like a step backward.

“The value of resilience is the disaster that never arrives — and a portfolio that can only count the benefits it can see will always underweight the catastrophes it cannot.”

5. The honest account

Here, then, is where I have landed, offered without the false confidence that the situation does not permit.

The benefits frameworks were not wrong. They were partial, and the good years hid the partiality. They measured one kind of value — growth — supremely well, and let us forget that value has other kinds, resilience and survival among them, which a framework built for expansion is structurally unable to see. The crisis did not break the frameworks. It revealed a limit that was there all along, and that we will face again the next time the ground moves, because growth is not the permanent condition of anything.

What I think we owe the portfolios we run is not to throw the frameworks away — that would be to lose the real discipline they carry — but to stop pretending they measure value in full. A mature portfolio should carry two accounts, not one: the benefits account that measures what programmes produce, and a second, harder account that measures what they protect and what future moves they preserve. In good times the first account governs and the second sits quietly in reserve. In a year like this one, the second account should govern, and the first should be read with the knowledge that it is measuring a currency the organisation has temporarily stopped trading in.

We did not have that second account this time. We governed on the first while the real decisions migrated to the corridor, and we were fortunate that the judgement in the corridor was, on the whole, sound. Next time we may not be so fortunate, and the honest thing to do with that luck is to build the account we needed before we need it again. Value is not growth. It only looked that way for as long as we could afford to believe it.