

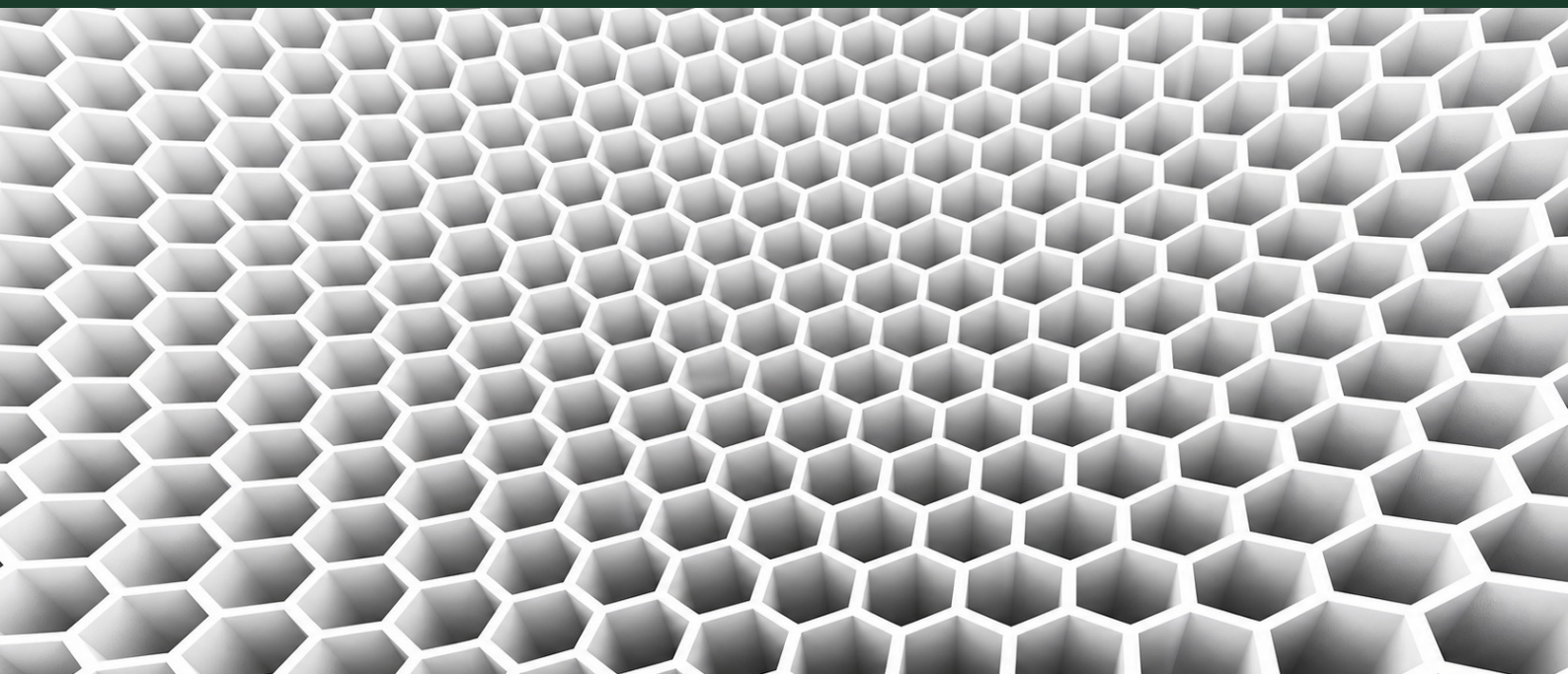
BEYOND BOARDROOM AUTHORITY

Virtual Programme Boards Did Not Weaken Governance — They Exposed How Little the Room Was Doing

An honest account of authority, challenge and informal power after governance moved online

Giovanni Leonardi

October 2020



Virtual Programme Boards Did Not Weaken Governance — They Exposed How Little the Room Was Doing

Programme · No. 225

Originally written October 2020 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

“Virtuality did not create this discipline. It removed the social tolerance for its absence.”

The Honest Discovery

A programme board that had met in the same room for three years moved online in March. Its first virtual meeting lasted 58 minutes instead of two hours. The programme director presented no more than six slides. The chair asked for two decisions, received both, and closed the call with named owners and dates.

Nothing was missing except the theatre.

That is the uncomfortable truth of virtual programme governance in 2020. The abrupt move from boardrooms to bedrooms did not weaken governance nearly as much as many feared. It revealed how little of what happened in the boardroom was governance at all.

The formal model told us that programme boards existed to direct, assure and decide. The lived model was often different. Boards received information, witnessed presentations, represented functional interests and gave senior people a sense of proximity to the programme. Decisions emerged elsewhere: in a sponsor’s office, through a private conversation between finance and technology, or after the meeting when somebody interpreted what “the board was minded to support” actually meant.

The screen has made that ambiguity visible.

Distance Punishes Passive Governance

In a physical room, passivity can look like participation. People sit at the table, turn pages, nod and contribute a comment when their function appears. The setting supplies seriousness. A full agenda supplies momentum. The meeting finishes with the emotional impression that the programme has been governed.

Online, passive attendance is exposed. Cameras go dark. Emails compete with the presenter. A status recital that was merely dull in a boardroom becomes indefensible when fourteen senior people are listening from separate locations under difficult

conditions.

The strongest virtual boards have responded by changing the unit of governance from the agenda item to the decision.

A composite programme provides the mechanism. It was responsible for preserving an essential customer service while several sites operated with restricted capacity. Before March, its monthly board pack averaged 84 pages and carried twelve standing agenda items. Decisions took an average of nineteen days from first presentation to recorded approval.

By June, the board met for 40 minutes each week. The pre-read began with a one-page decision register:

- Decision required
- Accountable decision-maker
- Options and consequences
- Mandatory advice
- Latest useful decision date
- Evidence that would confirm the decision worked

The wider pack remained available but was not presented. Specialists joined for the relevant item rather than the entire meeting. The average decision time fell to five days. More significantly, decisions stopped disappearing into phrases such as “subject to further assurance” because the required assurance was present when the question was asked.

Virtuality did not create this discipline. It removed the social tolerance for its absence.

A programme board is not a place where senior people become informed; it is the mechanism through which authority becomes a decision.

The Textbook Assumed the Room Was Neutral

Conventional programme guidance tends to describe governance structurally: roles, terms of reference, reporting cycles, tolerances, escalation and assurance. These are necessary, but they leave out the human infrastructure of a physical board.

The room was never neutral. It gave the sponsor informal access before the meeting. It allowed disagreement to be softened over coffee. It let an experienced chair sense who was unconvinced. It also allowed hierarchy to operate without being named. Some people spoke because of where they sat. Others mistook silence for consent.

When the room vanished, these functions did not vanish with it. They moved into private calls, messages and smaller networks. That has created a genuine risk: the formal virtual board may be clear while the real negotiation becomes less visible.

The strongest objection to virtual governance is therefore not poor connection or reduced attention. It is the loss of shared context and the unequal distribution of informal

access. A new programme manager may see only the scheduled call, while established participants arrive already knowing which option the sponsor favours. A quiet technical concern may not find the natural moment to surface. Disagreement can be resolved efficiently by excluding those who would complicate it.

This is not an argument for returning uncritically to the boardroom. Physical proximity also concealed exclusion. It is an argument for designing the informal work rather than pretending formal procedure is sufficient.

Challenge Must Become Explicit

In the old room, a competent chair could notice hesitation and invite it. Online, challenge must be more deliberate.

The practice that works is simple:

1. Send the decision question before the meeting, not merely the paper.
2. Ask required advisers to state support, support with conditions or do not support.
3. Record the reason for dissent, even when the accountable executive proceeds.
4. Give affected operational roles a route to the chair before the decision.
5. Review the result against evidence, not against the confidence of the original presentation.

This discipline improves more than virtual meetings. It separates advice from veto and consensus from accountability. A risk specialist can state a serious objection without being forced to own the service decision. The accountable executive can proceed, but cannot pretend the objection was never made.

The virtual board's apparent coldness can therefore be useful. It forces governance to rely less on mood and more on an explicit chain from question to authority to consequence.

Presence Is the Wrong Proxy

Some organisations have responded to distance by tightening observable behaviour: cameras expected, attendance monitored, contribution encouraged from everyone. These rules may help a discussion, but they can also become substitute controls.

A person visible on screen is not accountable. A person who speaks is not necessarily adding judgement. A board with perfect attendance can still avoid its only material decision.

The honest test is harsher:

- Did the board decide what only it could decide?
- Was the right evidence available?
- Was material challenge heard?
- Was one person accountable?
- Were conditions, expiry and review recorded?

- Did the programme act?
- Did the outcome change?

Everything else is meeting management.

What We Should Carry Forward

By October, the temporary nature of remote working is already becoming a misleading assumption. Even where people return to offices, dispersed teams, suppliers and specialists will remain part of programme life. The question is not whether virtual boards are as good as physical boards. The question is which work requires which form.

Use virtual sessions for bounded decisions supported by prepared evidence. They are efficient, easier to convene and less tolerant of presentation theatre.

Use longer working sessions when the problem is not yet framed, when trade-offs require collective exploration or when participants lack shared context.

Use physical presence deliberately when trust, negotiation, conflict or relationship repair is the work. A room is valuable when human interaction changes the quality of judgement, not when furniture merely confirms status.

The point is not to choose a preferred meeting format. It is to stop confusing the format with governance.

Programme leaders have spent years asking delivery teams to become more adaptive while boards remained protected by ceremony. In 2020, the ceremony was removed without permission. What remained, when it worked, was a clearer governing mechanism: fewer people, explicit questions, visible authority, concurrent challenge and rapid evidence.

The honest account is that virtual boards did not make governance impersonal. They exposed how much personal influence had been operating without acknowledgement. They did not eliminate weak challenge. They showed where challenge depended on corridor access. They did not reduce authority. They made its absence harder to disguise.

We should restore the room when the room adds judgement. We should not restore it to rescue governance from the clarity of the screen.