

BEYOND THE ANTI-PROCESS NARRATIVE

What Genuine Process Discipline Actually Looks Like — A Defence of Structure in an Age of Orthodoxy

A Practitioner's Perspective on Portfolio Governance and the Difference Between Discipline
and Bureaucracy



What Genuine Process Discipline Actually Looks Like — A Defence of Structure in an Age of Orthodoxy

Portfolio · No. 18

Originally written August 2006 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition, 2025

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1. The Temptation of the Counter-Narrative

It has become fashionable — perhaps even expected — for experienced practitioners to rail against process. The critique is familiar: too much documentation, too many stage gates, too much governance overhead. And the critique is, in many cases, well founded. Organisations have built process architectures that slow delivery, frustrate capable people, and measure compliance rather than outcomes.

But there is a danger in the counter-narrative. In the rush to condemn process orthodoxy, it is easy to lose sight of what genuine discipline actually looks like — and why it matters.

This paper is a deliberate counter-argument. Not a defence of the status quo, but an attempt to distinguish between the process that suffocates and the process that sustains.

2. The Portfolio Without Discipline

Consider the organisation that runs its portfolio without effective process. It is not a theoretical case; I encounter it regularly.

In such organisations, investment decisions are made on the basis of executive advocacy rather than comparative analysis. The loudest voice in the room secures funding. Programmes are initiated without clear articulation of what they are expected to achieve, because the pressure to start exceeds the willingness to define. Dependencies between programmes are discovered late, because no mechanism exists to surface them early. Resources are allocated on the basis of who asks first, not on the basis of where they will create the most value.

The consequences are predictable: duplication of effort, programmes that compete for the same resources without coordination, benefits that are claimed by multiple initiatives simultaneously, and a portfolio that looks impressive on paper but delivers a fraction of its promised value.

This is not a failure of culture or of leadership alone. It is a failure of discipline — the absence of the basic structural mechanisms that allow an organisation to make informed decisions about where to invest, what to stop, and how to sequence its change agenda.

3. What Discipline Requires

Genuine process discipline in portfolio management requires a small number of things, none of which are complicated in principle but all of which are difficult in practice.

- A common language for investment decisions. Not a standardised business case template — that is the bureaucratic version — but a shared understanding of what constitutes a good investment case: the problem being solved, the options considered, the expected benefits, the costs, the risks, and the assumptions. The format matters far less than the rigour of the thinking.
- Visibility across the portfolio. Not a dashboard that reports RAG status — that is the compliance version — but a genuine understanding of what each programme is doing, what it depends on, and what it is delivering. This requires someone — typically a portfolio office — whose role is to see the whole picture and to surface the conflicts, dependencies, and trade-offs that individual programme teams cannot see from their own vantage point.
- Decision mechanisms that work. Not governance boards that meet monthly to receive updates — that is the ceremonial version — but forums with the authority, the information, and the will to make the difficult decisions: to stop a programme that has lost its justification, to redirect resources from a lower-value initiative to a higher-value one, to resolve a resource conflict that two programme directors cannot resolve between themselves.
- Honest reporting. Not status reports optimised for the audience — that is the political version — but information that reflects reality closely enough to support good decisions. This is perhaps the hardest requirement of all, because honest reporting requires an organisational culture that does not punish the bearer of bad news.

4. Two Portfolios

The distinction is easier to see through contrast. Consider two patterns, composited from multiple organisations.

In the first, portfolio governance is comprehensive. Monthly board meetings review a detailed portfolio dashboard. Every programme has a business case, a benefits map, a risk register, and a highlight report. The portfolio office produces a consolidated status report that runs to thirty pages. RAG ratings are debated at length. The governance framework would score well on any maturity assessment.

Yet the portfolio consistently fails to deliver its intended benefits. Programmes that have lost their strategic rationale continue because stopping them would require a formal closure process that nobody wants to initiate. Resource conflicts persist because the governance board reviews status rather than making allocation decisions. Dependencies are documented in a register but not actively managed. The portfolio office knows the status of every programme but cannot answer the question that matters most: is this portfolio, taken as a whole, delivering value proportionate to its cost?

In the second, the governance is lighter. The portfolio board meets fortnightly but for sixty minutes, not three hours. There is no consolidated dashboard. Instead, the portfolio director brings three questions to each meeting: what needs to be decided, what needs to be escalated, and what has changed since the last meeting. Programmes report exceptions

rather than status. The portfolio office is small — four people — but they spend their time analysing dependencies, challenging assumptions, and preparing decision papers rather than consolidating reports.

This portfolio delivers more reliably. Not because it has less process, but because the process it has is oriented towards decisions rather than documentation. The portfolio board makes decisions at every meeting, because every meeting is structured around decisions that need to be made. Resource conflicts are resolved quickly, because the portfolio director has the authority and the information to resolve them. Programmes that lose their justification are stopped, because the governance culture makes it safer to stop than to continue.

The difference between these two portfolios is not one of maturity, rigour, or professionalism. It is one of purpose.

5. The Distinction That Matters

The distinction between genuine discipline and bureaucratic process is not one of degree — it is not that good process is simply less of the same thing. It is a distinction of purpose.

Bureaucratic process exists to demonstrate compliance, to distribute accountability, and to create an audit trail. Its products are documents. Its measure of success is completeness. Its characteristic question is: has this been done?

Genuine discipline exists to improve decisions. Its products are better-informed choices. Its measure of success is the quality of outcomes. Its characteristic question is: are we doing the right things, and are we doing them well enough?

This distinction is easy to state and extraordinarily difficult to maintain. The gravitational pull in any large organisation is towards the bureaucratic end of the spectrum, for reasons that are entirely understandable: compliance is measurable, defensible, and auditable in ways that decision quality is not.

6. The Role of the Portfolio Office

The portfolio office is, in principle, the natural home of genuine discipline. It sits above individual programmes, with the vantage point to see the whole portfolio. It has access to the information needed to support investment decisions. It has the institutional role to challenge programme teams, surface uncomfortable truths, and ensure that governance mechanisms are working.

In practice, many portfolio offices have become administrative functions — collectors and consolidators of information, producers of dashboards and status reports, maintainers of templates and processes. This is the bureaucratic version of the role, and it is self-reinforcing: the more time the portfolio office spends on administration, the less time it has for the analytical and advisory work that would make it genuinely valuable.

The portfolio offices that add real value are those that focus on three things: ensuring that the portfolio reflects the organisation's strategic priorities, surfacing the dependencies and conflicts that programmes cannot see for themselves, and providing the analysis that

governance boards need to make informed decisions. Everything else — the templates, the dashboards, the status consolidation — is secondary.

7. Process as Enabler

The argument of this paper is not that process is inherently good. It is that the absence of process is inherently dangerous, and that the answer to bad process is not less process but better process.

The organisations that navigate complex change well are not those that have abandoned structure in favour of informality. They are those that have learned to distinguish between the process that exists to serve the work and the process that exists to serve itself. They invest in the disciplines that improve decisions and strip away the mechanisms that merely demonstrate compliance. They understand that the goal is not process maturity — that much-measured, much-rewarded abstraction — but delivery maturity: the organisational capacity to identify the right changes, initiate them effectively, deliver them reliably, and realise their intended benefits.

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This is a harder standard to meet than compliance with any framework. It requires judgement, experience, and a willingness to challenge orthodoxy — including the emerging orthodoxy that says process itself is the problem.