

BEYOND THE SPONSOR

Why PMOs Get Disbanded After Every Leadership Change

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Political Survival of Programme Management Offices



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1. Executive Summary

There is a pattern in programme governance that deserves more attention than it receives. When a senior leader who sponsors a PMO departs — through promotion, restructuring, or simple career movement — the PMO is disproportionately likely to be disbanded, restructured, or marginalised by their successor. This does not happen to finance functions. It does not happen to HR functions. It does not happen to IT functions. But it happens to PMOs with a regularity that suggests something structural rather than accidental. This essay explores what that something is.

2. The Pattern

The sequence is consistent enough to describe as a lifecycle stage. A senior leader — typically a CIO, a COO, or a transformation director — establishes or champions a PMO. The PMO operates effectively under their sponsorship, providing portfolio visibility, governance rigour, and decision support. The sponsor departs. Their successor arrives with their own priorities, their own leadership style, and their own views about how the organisation should be governed. Within six to twelve months, the PMO has been restructured, reduced, absorbed into another function, or closed entirely.

The successor's reasoning is usually expressed in operational terms: the PMO is too expensive, it creates bureaucracy, programme managers do not value it, the governance model needs to change. These reasons are not fabricated — every PMO has weaknesses that can be cited to justify its closure. But the same weaknesses existed under the previous leader and were judged acceptable. What has changed is not the PMO's performance but the political context in which it operates.

3. Why PMOs Are Uniquely Vulnerable

The vulnerability of PMOs to leadership change is not a random misfortune. It is the product of several structural characteristics that make PMOs politically fragile in ways that other organisational functions are not.

3.1 The Sponsorship Dependency

Most organisational functions operate under institutional authority. The finance function exists because the organisation is legally required to maintain financial records and controls. The HR function exists because employment law demands it. The IT function exists because the organisation cannot operate without its technology infrastructure. These functions do not depend on the personal commitment of any individual leader for their survival. They are institutionally anchored.

The PMO, in most organisations, is not institutionally anchored. It exists because a specific leader decided it should exist. Its authority derives from that leader's mandate, not from any organisational requirement. Its governance role is granted by the sponsor, not mandated by policy. When the sponsor departs, the institutional basis for the PMO departs with them. The incoming leader is free to redefine, restructure, or eliminate the PMO in a way that they could not do with finance, HR, or IT.

This sponsorship dependency is the single most significant structural weakness in PMO design. A function that depends for its survival on the continued presence and commitment of one individual is, by definition, a temporary function. The only question is how long the sponsor stays.

3.2 The Governance Inconvenience

A PMO that is doing its job well is, by its nature, inconvenient for the leaders it governs. It asks questions that programme sponsors would prefer not to answer. It produces reports that reveal uncomfortable truths about programme performance. It imposes governance requirements that constrain the speed at which decisions can be made. It challenges the optimism that senior leaders bring to their change agendas.

The leader who established the PMO accepts this inconvenience because they understand its value — they have seen what happens without it. Their successor has no such experience. They experience the inconvenience without the context that justifies it. The PMO appears to them as an overhead function that slows things down, creates paperwork, and tells them things they do not want to hear. The incentive to restructure or remove it is strong.

3.3 The Personalisation of Governance

New leaders want to make their mark. They want to reshape the organisation in their own image, demonstrate that they are bringing a different approach, and differentiate themselves from their predecessor. The PMO is a visible manifestation of the predecessor's governance philosophy. Retaining it is, symbolically, an endorsement of the previous regime. Restructuring it is a visible signal that things are changing.

This personalisation of governance is not unique to PMOs, but PMOs are more vulnerable to it than most functions. A new leader who restructures the finance function sends a signal about their financial priorities. A new leader who restructures the PMO sends a signal about their management style — a signal that says I do not need to be governed in the way my predecessor was governed. It is a statement of confidence, and it is made at the PMO's expense.

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3.4 The Accountability Vacuum

When a PMO is disbanded, nobody is held accountable for the consequences. The decision to close the PMO is made at the executive level, and the consequences — declining portfolio visibility, eroding governance standards, unmanaged cross-programme dependencies — emerge gradually over months or years. By the time the consequences become visible, they are no longer attributable to the decision that caused them. The leader who disbanded the PMO may have moved on themselves, or the connection between the PMO's closure and the subsequent governance failures may simply be too diffuse to establish.

This accountability vacuum removes the natural check on the decision to disband. In most organisations, closing a function that proves to have been essential carries consequences for the person who closed it. For PMOs, it does not, because the consequences take too long to materialise and are too difficult to attribute.

4. The Deeper Problem

The vulnerability of PMOs to leadership change reveals a deeper problem in how organisations think about programme governance. Programme governance is treated as a management preference rather than an organisational requirement. One leader prefers strong central governance and establishes a PMO. Their successor prefers distributed governance and closes it. The next leader reinstates it. Each leader treats governance design as a personal choice, like management style or meeting culture, rather than as organisational infrastructure that should persist across leadership transitions.

This treatment is unique to programme governance. No incoming CIO arrives and announces that the organisation no longer needs information security governance. No incoming CFO arrives and announces that financial controls are unnecessary overhead. These governance functions are understood as institutional requirements that transcend individual leadership preferences. Programme governance has not achieved that status, and until it does, PMOs will remain dependent on the personal commitment of individual sponsors and vulnerable to the personal preferences of their successors.

5. What Would Institutional Anchoring Look Like?

The solution is not to make PMOs immune to leadership change — every function should be subject to review and challenge. The solution is to give programme governance the same institutional anchoring that other governance functions enjoy. This would mean:

A governance charter. Programme governance would be defined in a formal charter, approved by the board or the executive committee, that specifies the governance model, the functions it requires, and the authority structure that supports it. The charter would not prescribe a PMO — it would prescribe governance requirements that the PMO (or whatever function fulfils them) must meet. Changing the charter would require executive committee approval, not the decision of an individual leader.

Regulatory alignment. In regulated industries, programme governance requirements can be anchored to regulatory expectations. Financial services regulators expect evidence of programme governance. Government departments are required to follow gateway review processes. Health sector organisations must demonstrate clinical safety governance for technology programmes. Aligning the PMO's mandate to regulatory requirements gives it

an institutional basis that survives leadership change.

Portfolio governance policy. The organisation would adopt a portfolio governance policy that defines the minimum governance standards for programmes above a certain size or risk profile. The policy would be owned by the board, not by an individual executive, and the PMO would be the function charged with implementing it. A new leader could change how the PMO operates, but could not eliminate the governance requirements without changing the policy.

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Governance performance metrics. The organisation would track the quality of its programme governance over time – decision timeliness, portfolio visibility, benefits realisation rates, cross-programme dependency management – and report these metrics to the board alongside financial and operational performance metrics. A decline in governance performance following a PMO disbandment would be visible and attributable, closing the accountability vacuum that currently allows the decision to pass without consequence.

6. The Uncomfortable Truth

The reason PMOs get disbanded after leadership changes is not that they lack value. It is that their value is not institutionally recognised. They exist at the pleasure of an individual sponsor, they are perceived as a governance preference rather than a governance requirement, and they carry the political association with the leader who created them. Until organisations treat programme governance with the same institutional seriousness they apply to financial governance, risk governance, or regulatory compliance, PMOs will continue to be established with conviction and disbanded with convenience. The cycle will persist, and each revolution will carry the same cost: the loss of capability that took years to build, the erosion of standards that took effort to establish, and the eventual programme failure that prompts the next revolution.

The question is whether the organisation is willing to break the cycle by giving programme governance an institutional foundation – or whether it prefers to keep rebuilding from scratch every time a new leader arrives. The first option requires a difficult conversation at the executive level about the permanence of governance. The second option requires nothing, which is why it remains the default.