

BEYOND OVERSIGHT

Why Programme Boards Became Status Meetings

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Decision Deficit in Programme Governance



Giovanni Leonardi

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The Room Where Nothing Is Decided

Sit quietly at the back of a programme board in almost any large organisation this year and you will watch the same ritual unfold. A senior group assembles, monthly, sometimes at real expense in diaries and airfares. A pack of thirty or forty slides has gone round the night before, too late to read and too dense to absorb. The programme manager narrates a wall of red, amber and green. Heads nod. A handful of questions are asked, and most of them concern the reporting rather than the work it describes. An action or two is minuted. And then everyone leaves, having decided almost nothing.

I have watched this scene often enough to stop treating it as an accident. The programme board, an instrument designed to steer, has quietly become an instrument that observes. It has turned into a status meeting wearing the costume of governance. And because it still carries the name of governance, the organisation persuades itself that it is being governed.

How Steering Turned Into Watching

The drift is not caused by weak people. The rooms I am describing are full of capable, senior individuals doing their conscientious best. The drift is structural, and three forces produce it.

The first is the tyranny of the pack. Somewhere in the last decade the programme report became the deliverable, rather than the decision it was meant to support. Preparing the pack now consumes days of a delivery team's week. Because it is expensive to produce, it must be seen to be used, so the meeting is organised around walking through it. But a document built to inform forty people about everything is precisely the wrong instrument for helping eight people decide one thing. The pack crowds out the conversation that governance actually requires.

The second force is the seduction of the traffic light. RAG status began as a useful shorthand and has hardened into a substitute for thought. A board presented with a page of greens experiences relief and moves on; a board presented with an amber asks politely when it will return to green. Neither response is a decision. The colour compresses away exactly the information a steering group needs, which is the trade-off, the choice, the thing only they have the authority to resolve. I have sat in boards where a programme ran green for four consecutive reporting cycles and then, in the fifth, went abruptly and irrecoverably red. The status had been honest each month about the wrong thing.

A programme board's product is not oversight. It is decisions. Every hour it spends being informed is an hour it is not spending deciding, and being informed is something its members could have done alone, at their desks, without the room.

The third force is the diffusion of accountability that a large membership creates. Somewhere along the way we came to believe that the strength of a board lay in its breadth, that every stakeholder function deserved a seat. A board of fourteen feels inclusive. It is also a board in which no single person is unambiguously answerable for the programme's success, and in which the social cost of asking the hard question is at its highest. Large boards are polite. Politeness is the enemy of steering.

The Tell-Tale Signs

You can diagnose a status meeting masquerading as a board without knowing anything about the programme itself. The symptoms are remarkably consistent:

- The agenda is a tour of the report, section by section, rather than a short list of decisions the board alone can take.
- The programme manager speaks for most of the meeting, and the board listens.
- Questions cluster around whether the reporting is accurate, not around whether the plan is right.
- Risks are noted and their owners recorded, but the board rarely uses its authority to remove one.
- The same amber items reappear month after month, gently ageing, because nobody feels able to force the choice that would clear them.
- Attendance is large, yet the real decisions are still taken offline afterwards by the two or three people who hold the levers.

That final symptom is the most damning of all. When the real decisions happen in a corridor after the board has risen, the board has quietly confessed its own irrelevance.

What A Board That Steers Actually Does

The remedy is not another framework. We are not short of frameworks; MSP and the Gateway process already tell us, if we read them honestly, that a board exists to direct and not merely to receive. The remedy is a change in what the room is for:

1. It meets around decisions, not status. The agenda is a short list of choices the programme cannot make for itself, the ones that require the board's authority, money or political cover.
2. It receives status before the room, not in it. The report is circulated to be read, and the meeting assumes it has been. The time together is reserved for the argument the report cannot have with itself.
3. It is small enough to be accountable. The people present are the people who can commit resources and absorb consequences. A board of six that decides is worth more than a board of sixteen that observes.
4. It resolves ambers rather than admiring them. An item that has been amber for two cycles is not a reporting problem; it is a decision the board has been avoiding.

5. It protects the honesty of those reporting to it. A board that punishes the first red will never see another one until it is far too late.

The Cost of a Board That Only Watches

It is tempting to regard all this as a matter of wasted time, a few senior hours consumed each month by a meeting that could have been a memorandum. If that were the whole cost it would be trivial. It is not.

The deeper cost is that decisions the programme genuinely needs do not get taken, or get taken too late and by people too junior to carry them. When a board declines to steer, the choices do not evaporate; they migrate. They move downwards onto a programme manager who lacks the authority to make them stick, or sideways into the corridor conversations I mentioned a moment ago. Either way the programme is now being directed by whoever is bold enough to fill the vacuum, rather than by the group the organisation appointed for the purpose.

There is a second cost, subtler and more corrosive. A board that only watches teaches the delivery team what the organisation truly values. If the room rewards a clean pack and a page of greens, the team learns to produce clean packs and pages of greens. The reporting optimises itself towards reassurance, and the gap between what the board is told and what is actually happening widens with every cycle, until it closes violently and all at once in the fifth month. The status meeting does not merely fail to catch trouble. Over time it manufactures the conditions in which trouble is kept from it.

The Harder Truth

There is an uncomfortable question underneath all of this, and it is worth naming plainly. Many programme boards have become status meetings because the organisation does not actually want them to decide. A board that merely watches is safe. It distributes reassurance without distributing risk. Its members can attend, nod, and remain untouched if the programme fails, because governance was seen to be done. The status meeting is not so much a failure of competence as a quiet institutional preference for the appearance of control over its substance.

If that is true, and in my experience it very often is, then no redesign of the agenda alone will fix it. The change has to begin with the senior individual who chairs the board being willing to say, in the room, that the purpose of the next two hours is to decide three specific things, and that the report will not be walked through. It is a small act. It is also, I have found, a surprisingly unpopular one, because it strips away the comfortable ambiguity that a status meeting provides.

We built these boards to steer our most important and most fragile endeavours. The least we owe them is a room in which someone is actually willing to take the wheel.