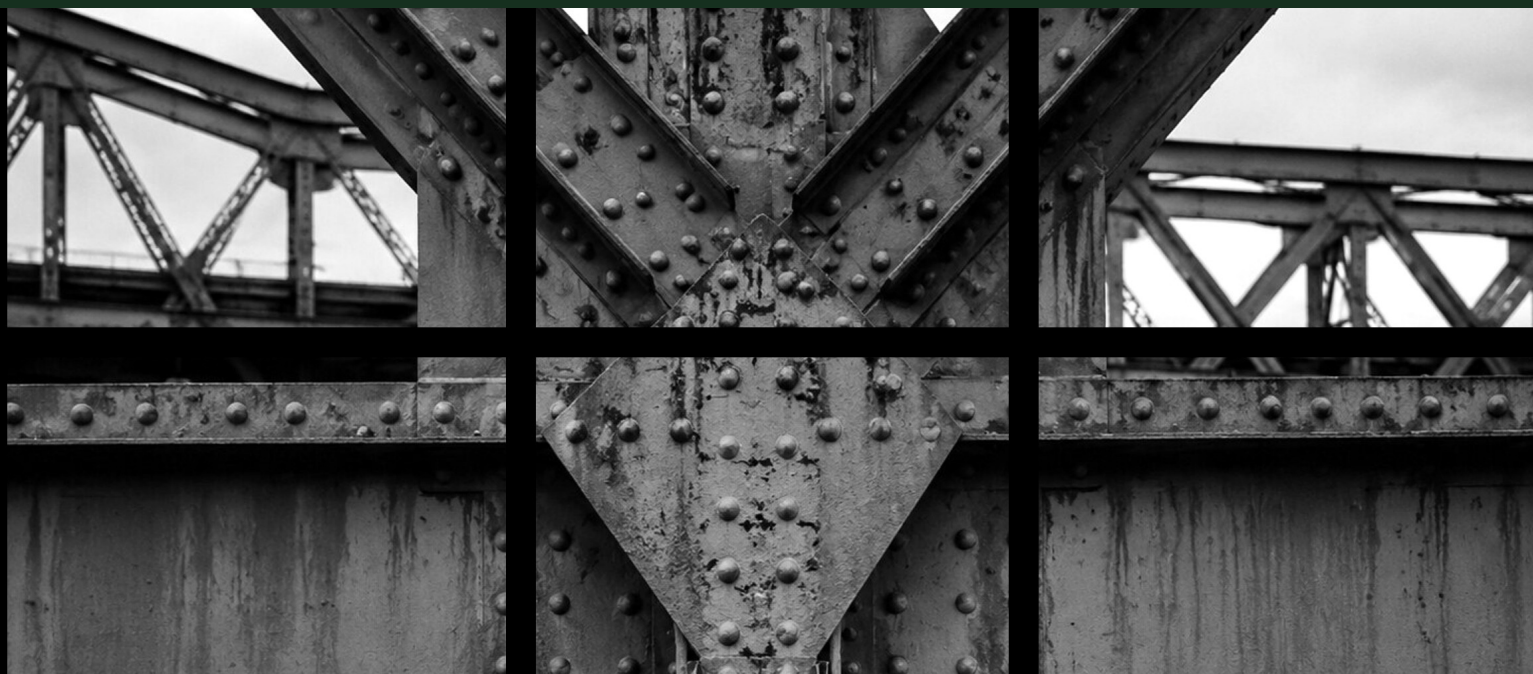


BEYOND BORROWED AUTHORITY

Why the Programme Office Dies With Every Leader — and What That Reveals About How Organisations Change

A Practitioner's Perspective on Why Programme Offices Rarely Outlive Their Sponsors



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1. Executive Summary

Across the programmes I have observed over the past two decades, one pattern recurs with almost seasonal reliability: a programme office is founded with conviction by an incoming executive, equipped with the full apparatus of reporting and control, and then quietly dismantled – often within the year – when that executive moves on. A successor arrives, pronounces the old office bureaucratic, and stands up a new one under a fresher name to solve what is, in substance, the same problem. Then the cycle repeats.

It is tempting to file this under ordinary organisational churn: the new broom sweeping clean. That reading is too comfortable, and it lets the real lesson escape. The office does not die because it failed, nor because it was disliked. It dies because it was never made load-bearing. It was built as the instrument of a person rather than a capability of the enterprise, and instruments of a person depart when the person does.

This essay attempts three things: to describe the pattern honestly, to diagnose the structural forces that keep reproducing it, and – most usefully – to ask what its persistence reveals about how organisations actually change, as opposed to the transformation stories they tell about themselves. The conclusion is an uncomfortable one. The serial disbandment of programme offices is not, in the main, a governance failure. It is an accurate signal. It tells us that the body an organisation sets up to steer its most important change has, in most cases, no independent claim on authority – and so it rises and falls as a courtier rather than as an institution.

2. The Funeral That Is Always Scheduled

There is a particular quality to the closing of a programme office that anyone who has spent time near the centre of a large organisation will recognise. It is rarely dramatic. There is no failure report, no formal post-mortem, no board paper explaining what went wrong. The office simply thins. A reorganisation is announced; its leader is granted a "broader remit" or moves on; its analysts drift back into the business units they once oversaw; and its reporting pack is described – in a phrase that ought to chill anyone who has ever built one – as "no longer fit for purpose". Within a few months the office survives only as a shared drive nobody troubles to archive.

What makes the pattern worth studying is not that offices are closed. Organisations close things constantly, and should. What is remarkable is that they are closed and then rebuilt almost at once, by the next occupant of the sponsoring chair, using arguments that are the

mirror image of the ones used to bury the last one. The office founded to provide grip is dismantled for being controlling. Its successor, founded to be lightweight and business-led, is in time dismantled for lacking grip. The vocabulary rotates; the underlying object does not change.

The founding narrative	The disbanding narrative
"We need grip on delivery"	"It had become a reporting factory"
"A single version of the truth"	"It slowed everyone down"
"Independent assurance"	"It second-guessed the business"
"Professional programme discipline"	"It was bureaucratic overhead"

Read the two columns together and the important thing becomes visible: these are not descriptions of two different offices, a bad one replaced by a good one. They are two descriptions of the same office, offered at two different points in a political cycle. The office did not change between the first column and the second. Its sponsor did.

3. Why the Obvious Explanation Fails

The convenient account is that incoming leaders simply prefer their own people and their own structures, and that disbanding the predecessor's office is a low-cost way of signalling a new regime. There is truth in this, but as a complete explanation it does not survive contact with the evidence, and it flatters everyone involved by making the whole affair a matter of personality.

If the office were genuinely valuable — if its removal caused real, felt pain to the people who run the business — no incoming leader could disband it so cheaply. Executives do not, as a rule, dismantle the finance function, the treasury, or the payroll system to signal a change of regime, however keen they are to make their mark. Those functions are load-bearing: remove them and something the organisation cannot live without stops within days, and everyone knows it. The fact that a programme office can be removed almost for free is the whole point. Its disposability is not incidental to the pattern; it is the pattern's cause.

So the honest question is not "why do new leaders disband programme offices?" — the answer to that is simply "because they can, at no cost". The real question is the harder one behind it: why is the office so consistently disposable in the first place? Why does an organisation's dedicated instrument for steering change so reliably fail to make itself indispensable?

- It is not, in most cases, for want of competence. The people staffing these offices are frequently capable and conscientious.
- It is not for want of method. By the middle of this decade the disciplines were mature and widely available — structured programme management, staged assurance, benefits tracking, portfolio-level reporting.
- It is not for want of effort. The offices I have watched close were rarely idle; more often they were exhausted.

The disposability comes from somewhere more structural than skill, method, or effort. It comes from where the office's authority is sourced.

4. Borrowed Authority

A programme office, in almost every organisation I have seen, holds no authority of its own. It cannot approve a business case. It cannot stop a project. It cannot move money between initiatives, hire or release the people delivering them, or overrule a director who has decided to go his own way. What it can do is report — assemble the picture, flag the risks, chase the actions, and carry that picture to someone who does hold power: the sponsoring executive.

This is the crucial structural fact, and everything else follows from it. The office's influence is entirely borrowed from its sponsor. When the sponsor is strong, engaged, and interested in what the office produces, the office is powerful by extension: its questions carry weight because everyone knows they may become the sponsor's questions. When the sponsor is distracted, weakened, or — decisively — gone, the office has nothing of its own to fall back on. Its red-amber-green ratings are just colours on a page. Its risk log is a document no one is obliged to act upon. The authority did not diminish gradually; it evaporated the moment its source walked out of the building.

An office that can only report depends absolutely on someone powerful who is willing to act on the report. Remove that person and you have not weakened the office — you have revealed that it was never standing on its own feet.

This is why the disbandment so often follows a leadership change immediately, rather than after a considered review. There is nothing to review. The office's value was never intrinsic; it was a function of a relationship, and the relationship has ended. The new sponsor senses, correctly, that this office is not theirs — it channels an authority they have not lent it — and so they let it fall and build one that will.

5. The Political Economy of the Office

Seen in this light, the programme office is best understood not as a delivery function but as a political one, and its life follows a political economy as much as a managerial one.

The office is established when a leader holds an agenda too large to keep in their own head — a transformation, an integration, a regulatory response — and needs an apparatus to extend their attention across it. The office becomes, in effect, the sponsor's nervous system: their eyes on the initiatives they cannot personally attend, their memory of commitments made, their early warning of trouble. This is a genuinely valuable role. But note whose nervous system it is. The office serves the sponsor's need to see and control, not, in the first instance, the organisation's need to change.

While that sponsor holds power, the arrangement works and can look, from the outside, like an institution. But its dependence is total, and it is exposed on three fronts:

1. **Succession.** The moment the sponsor leaves, the office loses its only source of authority. The successor has their own way of seeing and no reason to inherit someone else's nervous system.
2. **Attention.** Even while the sponsor remains, the office lives or dies by their attention. A sponsor who stops reading the pack, stops asking the questions, or is consumed by other matters withdraws the authority just as surely as one who leaves — only more slowly, and more painfully.

3. Association. The office becomes identified with its sponsor's programme and its sponsor's style. When the mood turns against the programme — and in any long transformation, the mood turns — the office is the visible face of it, and absorbs the resentment that cannot safely be directed at the executive.

An office that depends on one person's patronage, one person's attention, and one person's political standing is not fragile by accident. It is fragile by design — the design having optimised, without anyone quite deciding it should, for serving a sponsor rather than for surviving one.

6. What the Pattern Reveals About Change

Here is where the disbandment stops being a story about programme offices and becomes a story about organisations.

We describe transformation, in our board papers and our strategy documents, as something the organisation undertakes: a considered, collective, multi-year endeavour with a life independent of any individual. That is the intent, and it is sincerely meant. But the serial death of programme offices exposes how much of that is narrative and how little is structure. If change were truly institutional — owned by the enterprise rather than by a person — then the machinery built to steer it would outlast the individuals who happened to be in post. It would be inherited, not buried. The fact that it is almost never inherited tells us that the change, too, was more personal than institutional. It lived in the sponsor, not in the organisation.

“An organisation reveals what it truly owns by what survives a change of leadership. Most transformations, judged by that test, were never owned by the organisation at all.”

This is the gap between transformation intent and transformation reality, and the programme office is simply where the gap becomes visible. The office is the canary. Its recurring death is not so much a symptom of bad governance as an honest readout of how thin the institutional ownership of change actually is. We build offices to carry change across time, then discover that they cannot even cross the boundary of a single leadership tenure — because the thing they were carrying never belonged to the institution in the first place. It belonged to whoever last sat in the sponsoring chair, and it left with them.

An organisation that disbands its programme office at every leadership change is telling the truth about itself, if anyone cares to listen: here, change is something individuals do, not something the institution owns. The office is disposable because the change was disposable. Both belonged to a person.

7. The Narrow Path to Load-Bearing

If the diagnosis is that the office dies because its authority is borrowed and its ownership personal, then the remedy cannot be more method, better reporting, or a smarter tool. Those improve the quality of the borrowed authority; they do nothing about the

borrowing itself. The only durable answer is for the office to acquire an indispensability that belongs to no single sponsor. That is a narrow and difficult path, and I do not want to pretend it is easily walked — but its direction is clear enough.

1. Become the memory the organisation cannot rebuild. An office that holds the only coherent record of what was decided, why, what was promised, and what was spent becomes painful to remove regardless of who sponsors it — because the pain of its removal is felt by everyone who relies on that record, not only by its patron. Reporting is disposable; institutional memory is not.
2. Attach to a decision that recurs, not to a person who passes. An office that owns a standing decision the organisation must keep making — how investment is allocated across initiatives, which programmes proceed through the next gate — is anchored to a permanent need. Sponsors change; the need to decide where the money goes does not.
3. Serve the many, not the one. An office built as the sponsor's nervous system serves a single person and dies with them. An office that makes the delivery directors' own lives materially easier — one they would themselves fight to keep — has distributed its dependence across people who do not all leave at once.
4. Make removal visibly costly. The finance function is never disbanded to signal a new regime because everyone can see what would stop. An office should be able to answer, concretely, the question "what breaks the week after we close this?" If the honest answer is "a reporting pack", the office is already scheduled for its funeral.

The through-line is a single shift: from reporting on the organisation's change to being part of the machinery by which the organisation decides and remembers. The first is borrowed authority, and it is disposable. The second is institutional weight, and it is not. Few offices make that shift, which is precisely why the pattern is so common.

8. Reading the Disbandment Correctly

I want to end by resisting the natural sympathy the pattern invites. It is easy, watching a capable office wound down by an incoming executive who did not build it, to cast the executive as the vandal and the office as the victim. That framing is emotionally satisfying and analytically useless.

The disbandment is not vandalism. It is information. When a new leader can remove the organisation's change apparatus at no cost and no one outside it protests, the leader has not destroyed something valuable — they have revealed that it was not, institutionally, valuable enough to defend. The office had failed, across the whole of its life, to make itself load-bearing, and the disbandment merely settles the account.

The lesson for anyone who builds these offices is therefore not "find a stronger sponsor", though a strong sponsor certainly helps in the moment. A stronger sponsor only means a more comfortable dependence and, in the end, a more painful fall. The lesson is to spend the sponsor's patronage, while it lasts, on building something that will not need it — memory the organisation cannot rebuild, decisions it cannot stop making, a usefulness spread across too many people to withdraw at once. An office that does this may still be reorganised, renamed, or moved. But it will not be disposable, and disposability, not reorganisation, is what kills these offices.

The organisations that break the cycle are not the ones that find better sponsors or better tools. They are the ones that stop treating change as a thing a leader does and start treating it as a thing the institution owns — and, having made that shift, find they no

longer need to hold a funeral each time the chair changes hands.