

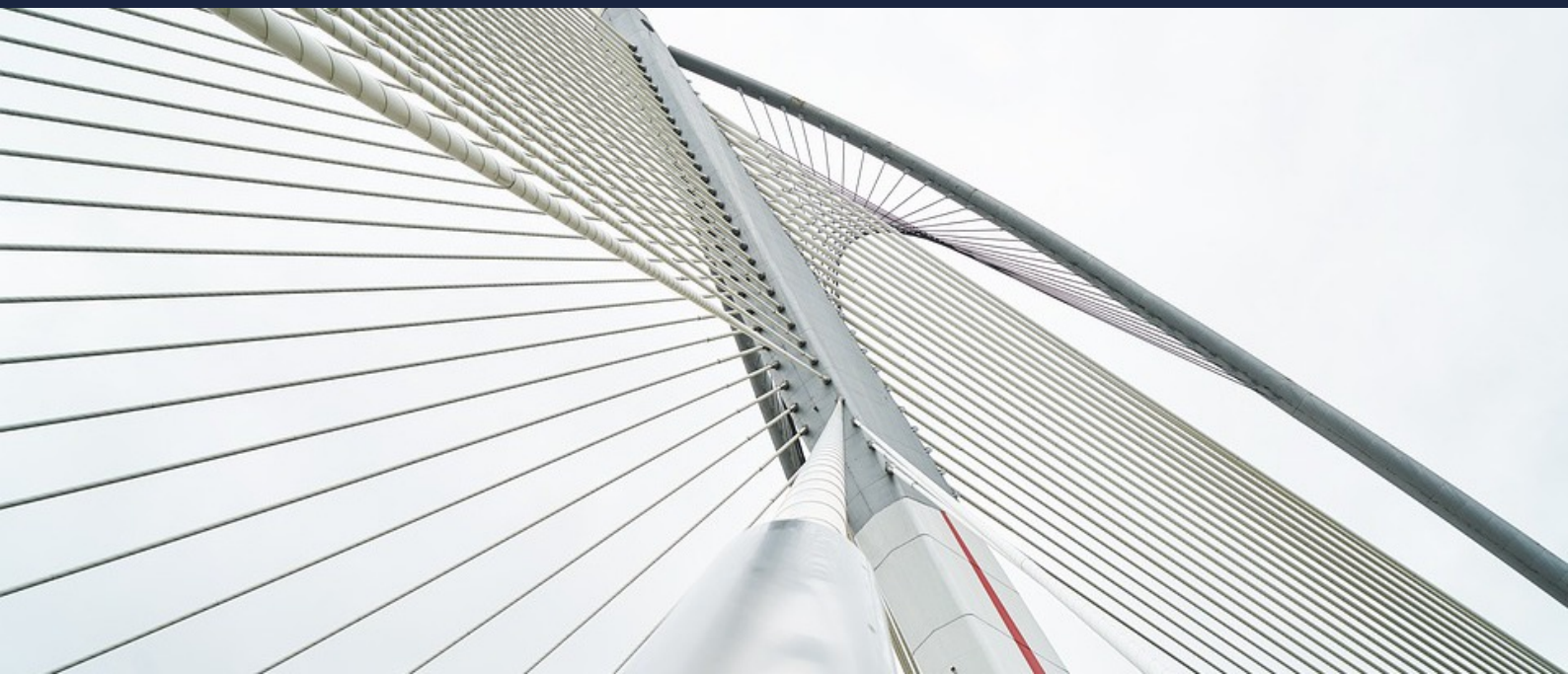
BEYOND THE METHODS

What I Would Tell a New Programme Director

A Letter to the Profession's Next Generation

Giovanni Leonardi

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“Your programme’s truthfulness is downstream of what happened to its last honest messenger.”

1. You have inherited a hypothesis

You will be given a plan. It will be detailed, perhaps beautifully so — milestones charted, dependencies mapped, resource profiles smoothed into neat curves. It will look like knowledge. It is not. It is a set of assumptions that nobody has tested yet, formatted to look like commitments.

Your first job — before you reorganise the governance, before you commission your first dashboard, before you do anything visible — is to find out what is actually true. Not what the last steering committee was told, but what the team leads would say if the recording light were off. The budget was set before anyone understood the problem well enough to cost it. The timeline was agreed in a room where the people who will do the work were not present. The risks on the register are the risks someone felt comfortable writing down, which means the important ones are somewhere else entirely.

The pattern repeats across industries and decades: a new programme director arrives and spends the first month perfecting the inherited governance — redesigning the reporting templates, restructuring the workstream meetings, producing a polished programme plan. They have not yet spoken to a single end user or visited the operations team whose processes the programme is meant to transform. When they finally do, typically around the fifth or sixth week, they discover that a core assumption underpinning the business case has already been invalidated by something the delivery team has known for months but nobody thought to escalate. Everything built on that assumption — the timeline, the budget, the resource plan — needs to be rebuilt. The programme is six weeks older and no wiser for it.

Ask the uncomfortable questions first. The plan will wait.

2. Decisions are your product

You will be surrounded by activity — reports being written, workshops being run, status updates being gathered, dependencies being tracked. All of it necessary. None of it the thing. Your product is decisions: decisions made, decisions forced, decisions escalated so that someone with the authority can make them. Everything else is inventory.

A week in which no decision was made or forced is a week the programme aged without living. The milestones still moved closer on the calendar. The budget still burned. But nothing changed that needed changing, no path was chosen that needed choosing, no ambiguity was resolved that was quietly paralysing two workstreams. You will learn to feel that kind of week in your chest by Thursday — a programme that is reporting green and deciding nothing.

The discipline is not simply to decide. It is to notice when a decision is hiding. Decisions disguise themselves as process questions, as requests for more analysis, as agreements to align offline. When someone says we need to take this away and think about it, what they often mean is that the decision is uncomfortable and delay is more comfortable than responsibility. Your job is to name the decision, frame the options, and make the cost of not deciding visible. Sometimes the right answer is to wait. But waiting should be a decision too, not a reflex.

3. Protect the honest messenger

At some point, someone on your programme will bring you bad news early. A delivery lead will tell you that a critical milestone is at risk before the status report says so. A technical architect will flag that the integration approach will not work. A finance partner will show you a forecast that contradicts the one the sponsor has already seen.

What you do in that moment will set the climate for everything that follows.

Your programme's truthfulness is downstream of what happened to its last honest messenger. The information that reaches you is never raw — it has been filtered through the incentives you have created, whether you intended to create them or not.

If the person who raised the early warning was thanked, was given the space to explain, was visibly supported in the room — then the next person with bad news will bring it forward. If they were challenged on their motives, told they were being negative, asked why they had not fixed it already — then the next person will stay quiet. And you will learn about the problem four weeks later, when it is four weeks more expensive to fix.

Protect them publicly. Protect them repeatedly. Make it unremarkable.

4. Learn the machines, but keep your judgement match-fit

You are entering the profession at a moment when the tools are more powerful than they have ever been. The platforms will generate your risk analyses, draft your stakeholder communications, surface patterns across your programme data that would take a human analyst weeks to find. Use them. They are genuinely good at what they are good at.

But understand what they cannot do. They cannot tell you that the executive sponsor's silence in last Tuesday's steering committee means they have lost confidence in the approach. They cannot read the body language in the room when the vendor presents

their revised estimate. They cannot sense that the programme's real problem is not scope or schedule but the relationship between two senior leaders who have stopped speaking to each other. These are the judgements that will define your programme, and they live in a register the machines cannot reach.

The generation ahead of you will include leaders who can only review and no longer do — people who have spent so long commissioning analysis that they have lost the ability to sit with a problem, work through the numbers themselves, and form a view before the model gives them one. You must not become one of them. Keep your hands in the work often enough that your judgement stays calibrated. Read the contracts yourself sometimes. Build the forecast from the raw inputs. Walk the floor, if there is a floor to walk. The machine is a powerful lens, but a lens is only useful if the eye behind it can still see.

5. Take the exit as seriously as the arrival

Careers are remembered at their edges. The programme you launched brilliantly and left in chaos will be remembered for the chaos. The programme you inherited in crisis and landed cleanly will be remembered for the landing. You will be tempted to focus all your energy on the dramatic phase — the mobilisation, the turnaround, the big go-live — because that is where the adrenaline is and where the recognition comes from. But the transition out is where the value either sticks or evaporates.

This applies at two scales. At the programme level: plan the transition to business-as-usual with the same rigour you would give to the transformation itself, because an organisation that cannot operate what you have built has not been transformed — it has been disrupted. At the career level: leave every programme so that the person who follows you can succeed. Document the decisions and why they were made. Record what was tried and did not work. Brief your successor with the candour you would have wanted when you arrived.

I have come to believe that the quality of a programme director is most visible not in how they start, but in how they leave. The quiet disciplines — the handover that no one asked for, the knowledge base that no one mandated, the relationships maintained after you no longer need them — these are the things that separate a career from a sequence of engagements.

6. Find your line before someone asks you to cross it

You will be asked, at some point, to present something as true that you know is not. It will not come as a dramatic ethical dilemma. It will come as a small, reasonable request. Can we adjust the forecast so the board sees a more encouraging picture? Can we defer that risk to next quarter's register so it doesn't complicate the funding decision? Can we describe the delay as a re-phasing so it doesn't trigger the escalation clause?

These requests will come from people you respect, people who are under pressure, people whose intentions are not malicious. They are managing their own stakeholders, and they need you to help. The temptation to accommodate is real, and it is not weakness

— it is the ordinary pull of professional relationships and organisational gravity.

Find the line you will not cross before someone pays you to look for it. Decide it now, when the pressure is abstract, because in the moment the pressure will feel specific and urgent and the line will seem negotiable. It is not. Your professional judgement is the only asset that compounds over a career. Every other skill depreciates. The reputation for being someone whose numbers can be trusted, whose assessments are unvarnished, whose reports say what they mean — that reputation takes years to build and one steering committee to destroy.

7. The craft is worth it

“The profession is harder to enter than it was, more consequential than it looks, and one of the few where the work, done well, is invisible.”

You have chosen — or found yourself in — a profession that does not explain itself easily at dinner parties. Programme management has no product to point at, no brand that carries its name, no moment where an audience applauds. The transformation that lands quietly, the cutover nobody remembers, the organisation that simply works better and never learns your name — this is what success looks like. It is, by design, invisible.

This will frustrate you sometimes. You will watch colleagues in more visible roles receive recognition for outcomes your programme made possible. You will explain what you do and see the polite glaze that says the listener has already stopped understanding. You will question, in the difficult months, whether the work matters enough to justify what it costs you.

It does. In twenty-six years I have not found work that mattered more, nor work that explained itself less. The organisations you will serve cannot transform themselves without this craft. The changes they need to make — to their technology, their operating models, their ways of working — are too complex, too consequential, and too full of competing interests to happen through goodwill alone. They need someone who can hold the whole in view while working in the parts. Someone who can translate between the executive corridor and the delivery floor. Someone who can sit with ambiguity long enough for the right answer to emerge, rather than reaching for the first answer that relieves the discomfort.

That someone is you, if you choose to be. The craft rewards depth over breadth, patience over speed, and honesty over comfort. It will ask more of you than the job description suggested. It will give back more than you expect, though rarely in the currency you anticipated.

Write things down. Leave things better. And when someone after you is standing where you are standing now — uncertain, ambitious, wondering whether the profession is worth

a life's work — pass the letter on.