

“IS YOUR PROGRAMME BOARD A HELP OR A HINDRANCE?”

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Best practice states that ‘*Successful delivery needs an engaged senior management team as part of the Programme Board*’. But as someone tasked with the responsibility for delivering major change, how do you avoid your Programme Board operating as a talking-shop, or worse, a forum that actually impedes programme delivery?

LOC Consulting often works with clients to recover under-performing programmes and it is clear from this experience that an effective Programme Board is crucial for delivery success. The good news is that it is never too late to ‘tune’ your Programme Board to help rather than hinder delivery.

Any textbook or course on programme management will tell you that to ensure effective direction and control of the programme you will need an effective governance structure. An effective governance structure is decision-making processes, whereby all stakeholders are properly engaged in key decisions, are empowered to make those decisions and provide relevant guidance to the programme team.

Experts will also tell you that your Programme Board should be at the heart of your governance structure. The board must include those stakeholders needed to ensure the correct business involvement to support delivery as well as alignment to existing business operations. What is often not stated is that having an ineffective or dysfunctional Programme Board can materially undermine delivery success and that it is, in many instances, up to the programme to rectify this!

However prevention is better than cure - put in place the right framework for the Board at the outset.

Your Programme Board acts as the ultimate authority for the programme, with a remit that includes making key decisions and unblocking issues that cannot be resolved at the programme level. An effective Programme Board;

- Sets direction for the programme and approves changes to scope in line with the vision,
- Is an effective decision making body – taking appropriate decisions at the right time,
- Is engaged in the resolution of issues that cannot be resolved by the programme, and
- Acts as a conduit between the programme and the rest of the organisation and external stakeholders (e.g. suppliers and customers).

That your Board will do these things and do them well is not a given! Having a textbook Programme Board is necessary but not sufficient. In fact, there are several ways in which your programme Board can thwart your attempts at successful delivery:

- Positive hindrance – actively taking decisions which they think will help, but in fact, don’t!

- Negative hindrance – actively taking decisions to undermine and obstruct the programme,
- Neutral – not taking any decisions and tending to act as an information sink.



“All those in favour of blaming our fiscal crisis on the Programme Director, please raise your hand”

The Programme Sponsor and Board ‘own’ the programme. The programme is thus, in theory, the agent of the Board. However it bears repeating that the programme should not suffer a dysfunctional Board without taking remedial action – it is up to the programme, in many instances, to provide a framework that allows the Board to operate effectively.

This influence can be affected, by the programme, in a number of ways:

- Defining the Terms of Reference,
- Proposing membership and managing attendance,
- Ensuring effective escalation of issues and risks, and
- Owning the administration.

And remember, the structure does not have to be static – configure the Board to align with a specific programme phase or activity if the current set up isn’t working. As the programme changes through the delivery life cycle so to does the Board’s involvement covering:

- Appropriate terms of reference,
- The right membership,
- The right behaviours, and
- Good reporting and information.

Terms of Reference

You will need to clearly define and articulate the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of all Programme Board participants and make sure these are signed up to by the entire membership. The sign off and acceptance of accountability for achieving the agreed programme’s outcomes must be built into the Terms of Reference¹. A Programme Sponsor with overall accountability for delivery of the programme is a non-negotiable and should chair the Programme Board.

¹ A sample Terms of Reference is provided in Appendix 2.

Of particular importance is getting the Board to accept collective accountability for programme goals rather than representing sectional interests. Good Boards will recognise that they “serve” the programme – but they will also demand good inputs and real clarity from the programme team to ensure the decisions are based on the ‘full disclosure’ of all relevant content.

Membership and Attendance

A credible and authoritative Programme Board is one that supports the programme by taking decisions, unblocking issues and providing appropriate direction.

The members of your Board must be both empowered and involved – one that can and will support the programme in this way. To get the correct behaviour it is key to understand what decisions are needed ahead of each board session, so plan for success.

Every change programme, whatever shape or size, will have stakeholders – you don’t get a choice in the matter. By stakeholders, we mean anyone with an interest in the success (or failure) of your programme. These stakeholders may be internal and external to the business.

Where, as is sometimes the case, programmes are set up outside business-as-usual activities, it is crucial to engage the operational line management as key customers and enablers of the programme. The Board is key to ensuring this level of buy-in, of programme goals and agreed business benefits, across the business. Membership needs to be appropriate to the roles to be fulfilled by the Board.

So, membership of the Board should **at least include**, bearing in mind the need for representative involvement:

- Programme Sponsor - must have authority to deliver the agreed business benefits.
- Programme Director - champions the programme within the business.
- Programme Manager - delivers the programme to time, budget and scope.
- Suppliers – those who deliver into the programme – should attend to ensure ‘skin in the game’
- Customers – those to whom the programme delivers
- Any other key stakeholders

With all Board members empowered to commit to actions agreed.

Any Board that has either the wrong members or too many attendees (or both) will have a negative impact on decision-making and ultimately delivery. As a rule of thumb, a Board that has more than 8 to 10 full-time members, or where more than 20% of the attendees are deputies, will struggle to be effective. So limit the number of deputies and insist that all attendees (including deputies) are fully empowered and have a full grasp of the programme content, context and relevance of the programme to the business so that they may fulfil their board responsibilities.

Each board meeting must be treated as a key, contributing event to the programme delivery, and not be compromised by avoidable attendance issues. Schedule the Board in line with programme needs and not diary constraints.

Behaviours

The correct behaviour of members is fundamental to removing and preventing obstacles to successful implementation of your programme – managing programme issues and risks is *not* about maintaining logs, it *is* about;

- Immediate articulation,
- Open discussion,
- Appropriate escalation,
- Prompt action,
- Resolution, not blame.

These principles apply to all levels of the programme including the Programme Board. In fact, one of the functions of your Board is to unlock issues and take mitigating actions against risks. Therefore, ensure that the roles and responsibilities on the Board give priority to resolution of issues and mitigation of risks.

Key to managing issues and risks is an escalation process that works, with issues and risks that cannot be dealt with by the programme, raised to the Programme Board. Don't raise issues and risks indiscriminately – apply a filter using factors including Impact, Probability and Ability to Control to ensure that only those where the Board's involvement is necessary are reviewed. Remember:

- Raising lower level issues and risks will make it look like the programme isn't able to sort out problems, and
- Not raising Board level issues and risks will leave the programme to deal with problems it hasn't the authority to fix.

Effective reporting and information

Support of the Board in terms of secretariat responsibilities must lie within the programme itself. The programme needs to influence structure, inputs, attendance and agenda – let go of this responsibility with extreme reluctance.

Provide the board with the correct tools including a high-level plan, milestone schedule and risk and issue log.

In this capacity, the programme needs to support the Board with a robust process, to confront the Board with real issues, engaging the membership on difficult decisions. It also needs to guard against decisions unravelling, becoming the basis for further discussion or being reopened as an excuse for inaction.

There will be times when the programme team participating in the board will need to be dogmatic to ensure effective decision making so that a decision doesn't serve as merely the beginning of the discussion.

Finally, serve all meetings superbly: timely and accurate minutes; a clear agenda; informative, honest, appropriate and accurate reports; advance distribution of papers, ensuring that all support the programme and not a specific function. This sounds a bit mundane and secretarial, but it forms the foundation for a professionally managed programme and fosters valuable stakeholder confidence - and you can't have too much of that!

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is the programme's responsibility to deliver the programme scope on time and within budget – it is the Board's responsibility to direct and provide basis to allow this to happen. Thus an effective Board is pivotal to achieving delivery success whilst it is the programmes responsibility to effect the appropriate corrective actions if the Board is not delivering. The Programme Sponsor is accountable for the delivery of the benefits and the programme having the delegated authority for delivery of the agreed programme outcomes.

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LOC is a specialist business consultancy that applies industry-leading experience directly to critical programmes and projects, delivering business success.

LOC views change as an essential component of a successful organisation. Our expertise helps you unlock the potential of challenges and opportunities facing your business.

LOC believes in client-side consultancy, taking a thin layer approach to management and complementing the existing skills.

LOC defines success by exceeding delivery expectations, and also by improving the capability of your team and helping them realise their programme management potential.

APPENDIX 1 : Reading Your Project Board

Promising Signs	Danger Signals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Board is represented by senior managers, including those most impacted by the change ▪ Programme sponsor is chairperson/ core member of the Board ▪ Programme is visible and key objectives are understood at the top of the organisation ▪ Mature informed debate at the Board ▪ Board discussions and decisions are focused around the need to deliver successfully – it is not an event to update management ▪ Programme team responsible for developing meeting content ▪ Board meetings are regular (at least monthly) not postponed and there is limited delegation ▪ Big issues are surfaced and addressed in a timely fashion ▪ The team sees the Board as an asset ▪ Board engages with content during the meeting, and members are involved outside the formal meetings ▪ Clear outcomes, decisions and actions emerge ▪ Good inputs with clear requirements for decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Board membership is dependent on availability of senior management ▪ Agenda focuses on programme update with minimal decision making activity ▪ CEO not clear on programme objectives or approach ▪ Senior managers distance themselves from the programme ▪ Programme operates independently of the Board ▪ Disjoint between the Board's vision and the programme's activities ▪ Board says "you/they" rather than "we" ▪ Long-running issues ▪ Pre and post meeting discussions ▪ Board seen as an overhead by the programme team ▪ Business stakeholders regularly question the benefits and business logic for the programme ▪ Observational membership defending sectional interests ▪ Personal agendas subvert programme direction ▪ Poor inputs and structure

APPENDIX 2 : Sample Terms of Reference

Delivery

- Own and ensure direction of the programme vision in support of the organisation's purpose, direction and value.
- Determine objectives, provide direction and agree priorities.

Business Case

- Ensure the programme aligns and integrates with the high level Business Plan requirements of the Organisation.
- Agree costing.
- Agree major change requests to timescales, budget or scope.
- Ensure the programme delivers business benefits as defined in the business case.

Programme Governance

- Oversee the effective delivery of the programme and ensure appropriate programme arrangements are put in place.
- Hold the Programme Management to account for the successful delivery of the programme to time, cost and quality criteria.
- Review and ensure appropriate actions are in place to mitigate programme risks.
- Monitor high level milestone progress.
- Oversee pilot rollout.

Steer

- Liaise with any Integration Board within the organisation.
- Represent the interests of any Executive Committee/s.
- Resolve issues that may impact the success of the programme and are outside the control of the programme.
- Help identify cross-programme or business impacts of programme activity.