

Why programmes fail - and what Boards can do about it

5 lessons for Programme Board members

1. Good process can't compensate for poor leadership

- Most of programme management assurance is based on assessing the processes of project control, progress monitoring, etc. - whilst this is necessary it is not sufficient.
- Successful programme delivery is based just as much on how leaders; use those processes; motivate / communicate with the people around them; and build collaborative teams.
- Effective leadership on large programmes is more about listening and asking good questions than it is about giving instructions.
- Leaders need to be able to; build relationships with people who see the world quite differently; handle conflict with confidence; and share control with others.

2. Perfect alignment between incentives and objectives is rare

- Alignment of goals and incentives across all parties can never be 100%. It is more important for leaders to be honest about areas of mismatch and be able to handle the consequences.
- But when the individual objectives of one party are actually in conflict with those of another this needs to be tackled right from the start in order to avoid future failure.
- Poorly aligned objectives and incentives can produce perverse behaviour. Good leaders notice the behaviour and reset targets rather than blaming the individuals involved or exploiting the perverse incentives for partial gain.

3. Judging progress from paper reports is only getting half the story

- When the paper reports of progress don't match your own gut feel or the messages that you are picking up from speaking to people, then you need to go see for yourself.
- There can be many reasons why a programme Board report can appear to be out of step with what is visible on the ground. Board members need to build a rich picture of progress from a number of sources and different perspectives - including personal experience.
- When something just doesn't smell right its worth investigating further - informed curiosity can be a great asset to a programme Board.

4. Change is inevitable - so strategic decision making is vital at every stage

- In the long run 'successful delivery' is defined in terms of the future business benefits not simply in terms of blind delivery of the original plan - no matter what changes occur.
- A small change to the external environment can have big implications to the long term success of the programme and so these change decisions should not be over-delegated.
- Independent members of a programme Board can play vital role in asking the awkward questions when change takes place and plans have to be re-evaluated.

5. Evaluating the quality of leadership is just as important as evaluating the plan

- Just as evaluating the health of any PLC is about more than looking at its last business plan, the same is true for a major programme. Programme evaluation at Board level needs to include the performance of the leadership as much as the progress against the plan.
- The quality of challenge around the programme Board table, the inter-personal dynamics of the Board and the operational processes by which Board members communicate with / learn from each other are all vital.
- The UK Corporate Governance Code is one framework that can be used for evaluating a programme Board. Using the code to focus evaluation on Programme Governance, Programme Operations and the Behaviour of leaders gives a balanced picture of the current performance and a sound foundation for assessing future delivery risk.