

LESSONS LEARNT – PROGRAMME AND PROJECT BOARDS



OGC Gateway™ Review reports often highlight project or programme governance issues. One of the most common aspects for comment is the programme or project board.

In accordance with OGC guidance found in PRINCE2™, the project board is the project's voice to the outside world. PRINCE2 summarises the role of the board as being the body which provides overall direction and management of the project within the boundaries set out by the project mandate. The SRO (the Project Executive) is ultimately accountable for the project's success, supported by the board members. PRINCE2 defines just 3 roles for the board; the SRO, the Senior User and the Senior Supplier.

Programme board guidance can be found in Managing Successful Programmes (MSP™). Here we see the board helping and supporting the SRO to drive the programme forward and deliver the outcomes and benefits. Anticipated membership includes the SRO, the head of the Programme Office, the Change Manager, the SROs of the projects making up the programme and the relevant heads of function such as Finance.

Nevertheless, the real world of large Government projects and programmes is rarely this simple. We have seen enormous variability in the way project and programme boards are structured and it is clear that there is no single formula. However, there are some themes which can be drawn out to help SROs and board members to make sure that the project or programme board fulfils its objective of helping the SRO to deliver the benefits. The quotes have been extracted from recent Gateway Reviews.

Programme/Project Board or Stakeholder Forum?

Most large projects and programmes have a huge number of stakeholders, from other government departments, devolved administrations, regional bodies, industry bodies and so on.

It is common for projects and programmes to seek representation of all their stakeholders on the board. It is intended that having them on the board will keep them on board!

The consequence of this is often large, incoherent project or programme boards where the accountability for decision making is diluted. You don't want all your stakeholders involved in all the decisions. The lack of clarity about the role of the board in this situation leads to no-shows or un-empowered delegates, so that even the stakeholder communication objective is undermined.

“... the Review Team concluded that there is a need for a second body, reporting to the PB, to allow stakeholder engagement and consultation. This would allow for a smaller, more focussed and effective Board.”

“...the Project Board is over-populated and meets in order to facilitate communication and does not act as a decision-making body”

The ideal situation is a small project or programme board empowered to take real decisions and make them stick.

Ensure that each board member has sufficient delegated authority so that decisions are made.

Lesson 1 - Don't confuse the need for a board to drive the project with the need for a stakeholder forum as a communication vehicle.

The SRO's servant or the SRO's master?

PRINCE2 and MSP anticipate a board that is essentially supporting the SRO from below. To quote Prince – “The project board is not a democracy controlled by votes. The SRO is the key decision maker because he/she is ultimately responsible to the business.”

However, we have seen examples across Government, where the SRO is no more than first amongst equals at the programme or project board. In other cases, he or she is subservient and takes direction from the board which is chaired by a superior. In one such case the review team found that the SRO was actually taking the role of Programme Director and that the real Senior Responsible Owner was his line manager, who chaired the board and took ultimate accountability for the decisions.

Lesson 2 – Be completely clear about the role of the project board. What are its responsibilities and what decisions can it take, if any.

All projects can benefit from a level of independent challenge. One way to achieve this, is to have one or more external Non Executive board members. These can be from inside or outside the civil service, but must be experienced enough to be able to anticipate the key issues and courageous enough to challenge the SRO, even when the going gets tough. Above all make sure that the Non Execs know what they are there for. Is it for specialist technical knowledge, overall project advice, or to act as the project's critical friend? If you are using a consultant – make sure you get your money's worth!

Lesson 3 – Consider having a non-executive board member – but be explicit about what their role is.

Gateway Review teams almost always welcome the inclusion of key suppliers on project and programme boards and often recommend it when it is not the case. When the project needs to work in partnership with the supplier, their inclusion on the board is a clear signal of a healthy relationship.

As well as the board gaining the supplier's valuable insight, relationship issues are more likely to be escalated and dealt with quickly before the rot sets in. The supplier will naturally have to step out of the meeting during discussions impacting the commercial aspects of the project.

Lesson 4 – Bring the key suppliers into the board.

Programme Complexity

Programmes present particular challenges, beyond those of most projects. Two situations have been highlighted by Gateway reviews that need particular thought when considering the governance and board structure.

The first is where a central government body is leading a programme which is deployed in many local or regional organisations. These can be, for example, local authorities, emergency services or Strategic Health Authorities. Governance can quickly become very complex resulting in unclear accountability for delivery. In the worst case, a central programme doesn't own the overall benefit delivery in the regions and the regional bodies have no ownership of a solution that is 'not invented here'. There is no simple solution to these challenges – but one answer destined to fail is making the board structures overly complex in an attempt to govern everything.

“The Project Board does not have sufficient delegated authority from the Programme; one example being the need to have the plan approved by both the Project and Programme Boards, despite the Programme Director being the Project SRO and the chair of the Project Board. Respective governance responsibilities between the two boards needs to be sorted”

The second situation is where a programme comprises only a small number of large projects and the governance of the projects begins to overlap with that of the programme. This can lead to delay and frustration which is caused by confusion about accountabilities and where decisions are really taken.

Lesson 5 – Don’t let the relationships between programme boards and project boards become too complex. Keep it simple!

Turnover in the board

Continual change in personnel is a recognised problem in big projects and programmes. Short tenure of SROs and Programme Directors is particularly damaging. Too much churn in board composition is also a bad idea.

“... the implementation phase will expose the project team to a new set of pressures, driven by the complexity of implementation in a short timeframe. This will require a more directive approach by the project team. Rapid decision making will be essential during this phase.”

However, it is also true that different phases of the project or programme will require different representatives at the board. In the early phases there may be a large ongoing policy development element. Programme boards (in particular) tend to be larger in the early phases. However, by the time a large change is ready to go live there will be a need for intense activity and focused and authoritative decisions which are best taken by a small board. It is worth mapping out the expected board composition throughout the project lifecycle, so these changes can be proactively managed.

Lesson 6 – Don’t allow continual change in the board – but when you do enter a new phase recognise that you may also need to reshape the board.

Papers Papers Papers

Gateway teams see a large number of board papers. Board members may only be able to devote a few hours of their time in advance of a board meeting. Project teams don’t always get the balance right between under-informing the board and burying them in papers. If the board does not find the sweet-spot between these extremes then the board cannot act as an effective decision making and driving body.

“The project has a board that meets at intervals but this is not seen as a decision-making forum, nor does it address commercial issues.”

Best practice, which is hard to achieve, is to meet the conflicting objectives of conciseness, transparency, and completeness. There are two particular lessons for project teams to help them inform the board effectively. The first is to present the project status in a standard consistent repeatable way against standard definitions. The reporting dashboard used in the joint OGC/Cabinet Office Major Projects and Programmes reporting provides an example of such a standard. The second is to report issues on an exception basis.

Board members have a right to good quality, concise information and SROs have a right to expect that it is read.

Lesson 7 - The discussions and decisions of the board will only be as good as the information with which it is provided.

Want to know more?

If you would like to find out more on the lessons from Programme and Project Boards or have suggestions for future subjects you would like us to report on, then please contact the OGC Service Desk as shown at the end of this bulletin

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