

Building Confidence in Complex Programs: Governance, Insight and Trust

Marcus Catchpole
Managing Director - Scyne Advisory



Transformation programs are growing larger, faster, and more complex – trust is a key indicator of success

The Modern Transformation Challenge:

- CEOs believe they need to transform every 5 years – and **AI is accelerating that pressure**
- Complexity is rising across **technology, regulation, geopolitics, workforce** and **financial constraints**
- The PMI now defines success as **delivering value that exceeds effort and expense**, as perceived by all key stakeholders – a high bar!
- This environment is **volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous** – and it almost guarantees something will go wrong
- Leaders are nervous about transformation - The biggest indicator of whether a team, project or organisation is resilient to setbacks is **trust**
- Trust comes from those charged with governance having **a clear, shared, and trustworthy picture** of what is genuinely happening.
- The ultimate goal is to transition from making decisions based on optimism to **fostering confidence grounded in insight**

Senior stakeholders need to trust that what they're being told reflects reality – because without that projects can rapidly get off track

What Senior Stakeholders Are Actually Afraid Of

- Senior stakeholders are overseeing projects that **carry immense long-term consequences**, often with national significance, especially in defence.
- They are terrified that the project will go off track.
- Governance committees are asked to make high-stakes decisions based on summaries - they need confidence that the information they're receiving is reliable and complete
- But "Green" dashboards **can mask quietly accumulating risk** beneath the surface
- The result is a **growing gap between perceived status and actual reality**
- In turn this can have detrimental impacts on the project's ability to deliver

A loss of trust from senior stakeholders triggers a cascade that slows delivery and consumes team capacity

When Confidence Erodes, the Program Suffers

- More questions, more ad hoc requests, more reporting – all **pulling focus from delivery**
- Requests for additional information, often without context, takes up valuable time
- Additional governance layers introduced, **creating friction and bottlenecks**
- Delegated authority is wound back
- Focus narrows to single issues at the expense of the holistic program view
- Senior leaders aren't looking for project teams to be perfect; they're looking to be confident that they'll tell them when things are not going right
- They want insight - why is this happening, what are you asking me for, and how can I help you?

Project management is one of the most studied disciplines in business, yet failure rates remain stubbornly high

Programs Keep Failing – Despite Everything We Know

- **Only 50% of projects succeed** when measured against a modern definition of value
- **13% fail outright**; 37% only partially deliver expected results
- A recent MIT study claims that 95% of AI projects fail
- **The governance and trust conundrum:** Unclear governance structures, undefined decision rights, and poor escalation pathways, excessive meetings are common root causes

Bridging the Gap: There are **FOUR** practical, action-oriented approaches to build and maintain that vital confidence and trust with your senior stakeholders

1. Build Trust Through Transparency, Not Blind Optimism

Confidence comes from clarity – governance groups want early, honest signals, not falsely positive reports.

- As a project leader, your value isn't just in reporting status; it's in giving governance confidence that what they're seeing is **accurate, complete, and balanced**
- Adopt a "Clear is Kind" approach
- **Move beyond superficial reporting:** provide insight into why things are happening and what decisions are needed
- **Surface issues early:** while there is still time to act; early course correction beats late escalation every time
- **Focus on the solution:** what do you recommend, why, and what is the impact?
- Clear roles and governance charters give you something to fall back on when individuals resist honest reporting

2. Implement Minimum Viable Governance

The smallest set of governance practices that provides clear oversight and control – without administrative burden

Minimum Viable Governance is the smallest set of governance, risk, and delivery practices required to provide clear oversight and control, without creating unnecessary administrative burden:

- **Define clear decision rights:** who owns what, what gets escalated, and where the tolerances sit
- **Streamline Forums for Decisions:** Governance forums should exist to make decisions, not share information or manage FOMO
- **Use consistent, simple and focused reporting:** it promotes conversation rather than interrogation
- **Change the governance structure when the phase of the project needs it:** Governance structures should evolve as the program matures, shifting from workstream-based to milestone-based oversight

3. Master Interdependencies

Large programs don't fail in isolation; they fail at the seams.

- Interdependencies - between technology, people, policy, and operations - are often where risks concentrate
- **Connect the dots:** Workstreams rarely have a natural cross-cutting view – someone needs to actively own it
- Understand and communicate how components interact
- Make pressure points and trade-offs visible to leadership before they become crises
- Making these connections visible is non-negotiable

4. Proactive risk management and learning from disruption

Shift from Reactive to Proactive Risk Management

- The key is not to prevent everything from going wrong but to react and respond effectively when things do go wrong
- **Shift from Reactive to Proactive:** Use the risk register as a dynamic communication tool, not a compliance artefact
- Facilitate structured risk identification sessions with delivery leads – and talk about the risks
- **Embrace Continuous Learning:** When things go wrong, learn from it; embed lessons into future delivery approaches
- Demonstrating maturity in recovery builds more trust than a program that never reports problems

When governance and trust are working, the entire program dynamic shifts – from scrutiny to confident delivery

The Payoff: What Success Looks Like

- Conversations shift from debating data reliability to making the decisions that matter
- Difficult trade-offs can be made transparently, and risks can be owned rather than avoided
- Delivery teams are empowered with clearer pathways, less noise and more time to focus on delivery
- Senior leaders transition from interrogators to genuine sponsors – actively clearing obstacles and enlisting their networks
- Governance becomes a capability, not a safety net – it actively improves decision-making and sharpens focus
- Trust enables resilience – when setbacks occur, the program recovers faster because relationships are intact
- **The result:** confident delivery of outcomes that matter, not just programs that stayed on time and budget

When senior stakeholders resist good governance, the first step is understanding why – because the solution depends on the cause.

When Governance Groups Won't Play Ball

- Seek to understand the root cause first: is it fear, lack of knowledge, a need to assert dominance, or an unmet need you haven't identified?
- Walk them through the structures and frameworks you've put in place – don't assume familiarity, approach it as getting them comfortable
- Involve governance stakeholders in designing the governance – programs that thrust structures on people without engagement rarely get buy-in
- Connect project success explicitly to organisational success – some individuals simply don't see the link between the program and their own outcomes
- Enlist help from above: if the program is truly strategically important, the CEO and Board Chair should be invested – use that to establish the right structures

Confidence in complex programs doesn't come from optimism – it comes from insight, transparency and trust.

A final thought

- The four actions are within your control: transparency, minimum viable governance, interdependency management, and proactive risk management
- When you get these right, you don't just improve the program – you transform how it is perceived and supported
- Your role as project managers is central to this; the insight you provide empowers leaders, frees teams, and drives outcomes
- **Australia's most complex and critical programs succeed when the people running them are trusted – and trust is earned through clarity**

Thank you

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