

GAPS IN GOVERNANCE

Forget governance by software, says Graham Oakes, just make a decision.



Graham Oakes: the problem is in our upbringing

When I graduated, the people in my year printed T-shirts saying: “Six munces ago I couldn’t even spell enjuneer, and now I am one.”

These days, it feels like governance is in that position. No reputable marketer will create a brochure that doesn’t position their product as somehow solving all the problems of IT governance. Six munces ago, they didn’t know what governance was, and now they’ve solved it...

Yet just about everywhere I go, organisational governance seems to be pretty fundamentally broken.

Project managers complain about lack of support from their sponsors. Enterprise architects bemoan the lack of joined-up thinking behind executive decisions. Business managers wonder how anyone could possibly have chosen this particular technology to meet their needs.

If we can’t get decisions like these right, then no amount of tracking access to some low-level service repository is going to save us.

Of course, the people who do understand governance have some nice-sounding recipes for solving these problems. Draw up a clear map of people’s roles and responsibilities, they say. Create RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) models to demarcate the ownership of each decision. Ensure that decision-making processes align to overall strategy.

One way or another, most organisations are trying hard to do all of this. Yet the poor decisions still seem to flow.

I’m not sure the problem lies in our organisational structures and policies. I very much doubt it lies in our architectural tools. I think the problem is in our upbringing.

For the first dozen or so years of our lives, our parents make most of the strategic decisions. When we get to work, we expect our executives to do the same. And management theory confirms this. *Harvard Business Review*, for example, in a special edition on decision making a couple of years ago, said: “Management is about making decisions. That’s what managers do.”

The problem is, most executives lack the expertise and situational understanding to make good decisions. They may want us to think that they’re omniscient and omnipotent (at least so as to justify their salaries), but the fact is that most executives are human beings. They have gaps in their expertise. They get overloaded with information. They make mistakes.

Good managers often don’t make decisions. They create an environment where the people in their teams, the ones who do have expertise and situational understanding, can make decisions. One of the biggest barriers to this is people who won’t make decisions, who refer every decision upwards to ‘higher authority’.

If you want to improve governance in your organisation, don’t buy a bit of software. Start telling your managers what to do, instead of asking them what you should be doing.

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