

# Different Failures, Same Structure: Why Governance Breaks Down Across Sectors <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Governance failures are routinely explained as local management or behavioural problems: insufficient oversight, poor communication, weak compliance, or inadequate training. This article argues that explanation is frequently incomplete. Structurally similar governance breakdowns recur across organisations that share no staff, systems, funding models, or institutional culture. The failure is often not situational. It is structural. Drawing on four practitioner cases spanning banking operations in India, large-scale workforce operations, and nationally funded research programme management in the United Kingdom, this article identifies a recurring three-stage failure pattern: unclear accountability and ownership, retrospective rather than live visibility, and escalation pathways that have never been tested under real delivery pressure. These conditions are described here as the Ownership–Visibility–Escalation Failure Sequence.

The article extends the Diagnose–Design–Sustain logic introduced in Taneja (2026) by demonstrating that the conditions this sequence is designed to diagnose are not unique to funded research environments. They recur wherever governance is introduced into a live environment before the foundations required for that governance to function have been established. Three practical diagnostic questions are proposed for governance practitioners before introducing or redesigning any governance framework. The central claim is this: a governance system running on reconstructed information can describe the past but cannot govern the present.

**Keywords:** *Programme governance, Governance failure, Cross-sector analysis, Structural conditions, Accountability, Delivery infrastructure, Research programme management, Practitioner research*

## 1. Introduction

Governance failures are usually attributed to discipline, communication, or managerial execution. When structurally similar breakdowns recur across organisations that share no staff, no shared systems, no funding regimes, and no institutional culture, that

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explanation becomes difficult to defend. The instinct, when governance systems stop functioning as intended, is to search for a human cause. Someone failed to follow the process. Reporting structures lacked enforcement. Teams needed more training. These explanations are often reasonable in isolation, but they share a common assumption: that the governance architecture itself was fundamentally sound and the problem lay in its execution.

That assumption is worth examining.

When similar governance failures appear across environments that share almost nothing structurally or institutionally, the problem may not primarily be behavioural. It may be structural. The same underlying conditions can produce similar governance breakdowns even when the sector, the delivery model, and the institutional setting differ substantially. In a previous PM World Journal article, the Diagnose–Design–Sustain sequence was introduced as a practice-derived method for building governance from scratch in funded research environments (Taneja, 2026). That article argued that governance failure in such environments is structural rather than managerial, and that diagnosis must precede design if governance systems are to be adopted rather than bypassed. What the present article examines is whether those conditions are specific to funded research or whether they recur across materially different settings.

The evidence from four practitioner cases spanning banking operations, workforce management, and nationally funded research programmes suggests they do recur. The sectors examined here had almost nothing in common. The failure pattern was recognisably consistent across all four. This article describes that pattern, explains the mechanism that produces it, and proposes practical diagnostic questions that practitioners can apply before introducing or redesigning governance systems.

## **2. Why Governance Interventions Fail**

When governance systems begin to fail, organisations usually intervene at the level of design. They introduce a new reporting framework, implement additional oversight structures, redesign accountability documentation, install a new programme management platform, or increase compliance expectations.

These responses are rational. They are also frequently ineffective.

The reason many governance interventions fail is not that the framework is weak. It is because intervention begins at the framework level before the delivery environment is properly understood. A governance framework introduced into a system where accountability is ambiguous, visibility is retrospective, and escalation pathways are informal will rarely function in the way its designers intended. Instead, formal governance competes with systems that already exist. Work continues through

relationship-based communication, proximity-based coordination, and locally trusted informal arrangements. By the time formal governance structures arrive, those informal systems are already functioning, however imperfectly. Formal governance does not enter as a replacement for absence, but as a competitor to habits that already exist.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) observed that formal organisational structures frequently diverge from actual practice. Organisations adopt formal structures partly to demonstrate legitimacy and alignment with external expectations, while coordination often continues through informal mechanisms. What this article adds is a practitioner perspective on where that divergence most consistently emerges: governance frameworks are frequently selected and implemented before the conditions required for their adoption are understood.

Szulanski (1996) identified similar dynamics in knowledge transfer, noting that the difficulty of transferring practices across environments is routinely underestimated. Governance frameworks face comparable limitations. A framework that functions effectively in one environment cannot be assumed to operate effectively in another without understanding whether the conditions that enabled it to function are present in the receiving environment.

Governance interventions also tend to occur when failure becomes visible rather than when failure conditions first emerge. By the time reporting delays surface, milestone slippage appears in review meetings, or inconsistencies become visible to leadership, the underlying conditions producing those problems have often existed for some time. Design-level interventions introduced at that point frequently address symptoms while leaving those conditions untouched.

The question organisations rarely pause to ask before redesigning governance is whether the conditions required for any framework to function are actually in place. Visible governance activity is easier to commission, communicate, and evaluate than structural diagnosis. New reporting structures, governance reviews, and oversight frameworks produce observable organisational action. Structural diagnosis does not. It requires examining how work actually moves rather than how documentation assumes it moves, and it frequently surfaces uncomfortable findings that nobody formally owns.

### **3. A Recurring Structural Failure Sequence**

Across the four cases described in this article, the same three conditions were absent at the point when governance intervention became necessary. These are described here as the Ownership–Visibility–Escalation Failure Sequence. This is not presented as a formal governance construct. It is a practice-derived description of the conditions that consistently preceded governance breakdown across materially different environments.

Its value is diagnostic rather than theoretical. It gives practitioners a structured vocabulary for identifying what is missing before attempting to build or redesign governance systems.

### **Stage 1: Ownership Ambiguity**

Formal accountability exists. Individual accountability does not.

Roles are assigned, and responsibilities are documented, but when a specific output is required, a decision needs to be made, or a governance input must be confirmed, there is no clearly identifiable individual responsible for providing it. This ambiguity is rarely intentional. It usually emerges because governance systems are designed at a level of abstraction that appears coherent at the organisational level but leaves accountability unresolved where delivery actually happens. Responsibilities exist on paper but remain unanchored in practice. The consequence is that accountability becomes negotiated informally through proximity, availability, or hierarchy rather than through clearly assigned ownership. In the banking network case described in Section 4, multiple teams assumed that another function was maintaining the relevant cost information. Nobody was. That is not a communication failure. It is an ownership failure. Accountability that cannot be named at the individual level does not exist reliably at the delivery level.

### **Stage 2: Retrospective Visibility**

Because individual accountability is unclear, information visibility becomes retrospective rather than live. Reports are assembled after deadlines are already under pressure. Data is reconstructed from multiple fragmented sources. Governance systems produce accounts of what happened after reporting periods close, but they cannot reliably influence what is currently happening. This frequently appears to be an information management problem. In practice, it is usually an accountability problem. When nobody owns specific accountability points, nobody is responsible for maintaining the live information those accountability points require. The visibility gap is a symptom. The ownership gap is the condition. A governance system running on reconstructed information can describe the past but cannot govern the present.

### **Stage 3: Informal Escalation**

Formal escalation pathways often exist in governance documentation. They have been designed, approved, and formally communicated. What they frequently have not been is tested under real delivery pressure. When problems emerge, escalation frequently occurs through informal relationships rather than through formal pathways. Issues reach decision-makers because someone knows whom to contact, not because the governance system routed the issue correctly. The escalation pathway that actually functions is often the one that was never formally designed. This occurs because escalation depends on

reliable visibility and clear accountability. If information is incomplete, delayed, or informally assembled, formal escalation pathways become difficult to trigger consistently or to trust in practice.

### **The Sequencing Logic**

These three conditions are not independent variables that can be addressed simultaneously or in any order. They are sequentially connected. Retrospective visibility emerges from ownership ambiguity because no individual owns the maintenance of live information. Informal escalation becomes necessary because accountability and visibility remain unreliable. The sequencing implication is significant. Governance interventions that target escalation or visibility without first resolving ownership ambiguity are often intervening at the wrong point in the chain. The sequence itself becomes diagnostic.

The relationship between this sequence and the Diagnose–Design–Sustain framework introduced in Taneja (2026) is one of scope. DDS describes how governance is built from scratch in a live-funded research environment: beginning with diagnosis, proceeding to design only once the underlying conditions are understood, and sustaining adoption through deliberate ongoing attention. The Ownership–Visibility–Escalation sequence is the diagnostic vocabulary that makes the first stage of DDS practical. It identifies specifically what to look for, and in what order, before design begins. Together, they describe different layers of the same governance problem.

## **4. Comparative Practitioner Cases: Four Environments, One Pattern**

The following cases are drawn from direct practitioner experience across two countries and multiple sectors over approximately twenty years. Each case is structured identically: context, manifestation of the failure sequence, initial intervention, and measurable outcome. The pattern is the argument. The cases are evidence.

### **Case 1: Retail Banking Operations Environment in India (2005 - 2008)**

A regional banking operations hub in North India processed multiple retail lending products simultaneously, including home loans, car loans, personal loans, and education loans. At peak activity, the pipeline contained approximately 150 to 180 active files per month. Turnaround times at the entry stage had reached approximately eighteen working days and were continuing to increase.

The failure sequence appeared clearly at the pre-processing stage. No specific owner existed for verifying eligibility completeness before files entered formal review queues. Accountability existed at the team level but not at the level of individual checkpoints. Discrepancies were identified late in the process, after files had already moved across

multiple stages, because visibility was retrospective rather than live. Escalation was informal and proximity-based, relying on verbal intervention when turnaround commitments were at risk.

The diagnostic process identified ownership ambiguity at the pre-entry screening stage as the origin point. A standardised screening process was then developed in consultation with credit managers, assigning clear individual ownership at the entry stage before files progressed. Within the first quarter, turnaround time reduced from approximately eighteen working days to twelve. The improvement was not produced by the checklist alone. It was produced by establishing who owned what before the work began.

### **Case 2: Large Banking Network Reporting Environment in India**

A large private-sector banking network operating across more than two hundred branches was undergoing rapid expansion. Cost information existed at the branch level but was not visible to regional or zonal leadership in a form that supported timely decision-making. The failure was architectural rather than informational. Data existed, but no structure connected branch-level activity to leadership-level visibility. Multiple teams assumed that another function was maintaining the relevant cost information and translating it into decision-ready reporting. Nobody was. Cost packs were assembled manually and delivered several days after reporting periods closed, reducing their usefulness considerably. Escalation on cost performance occurred reactively through informal communication rather than through systematic visibility.

Before any reporting system was built, structured conversations were conducted with leadership to identify the specific decisions the reporting environment needed to support. That diagnostic step determined the design. Automated reporting architecture was then developed around those requirements, reducing turnaround from approximately ten working days to one. Adoption was immediate because the system was built around actual decision requirements rather than generic reporting assumptions.

### **Case 3: Large Workforce Operations Environment in India (2019 - 2021)**

A technology-enabled operations company managing a distributed third-party workforce across India was experiencing escalating payroll inconsistencies and backlog across multiple vendor-managed arrangements. The failure sequence was concentrated around a specific accountability point. Attendance reconciliation relied heavily on manual verification, and nobody owned the responsibility for validating workforce records consistently against actual presence. Workforce visibility became retrospective and unreliable. Discrepancies were identified only when concerns surfaced informally, rather than through structured mechanisms.

The diagnostic process mapped the scale and location of reconciliation inconsistencies before any technology intervention was introduced. Revised accountability for attendance validation was established first. Biometric verification systems were then implemented to support those structures, not replace them. Significant discrepancies were identified and resolved through structured reconciliation and revised controls. Within the first sixty days following implementation, payroll leakage reduced by approximately 30%. The sequence mattered: accountability was stabilised before technology controls were introduced.

#### **Case 4: Nationally Funded Research Programme Environment in the United Kingdom (2024 - 2025)**

A UK university managing two nationally funded multi-partner research programmes was operating across multiple public-sector, academic, and research infrastructure partners under concurrent funder obligations from NIHR and UKRI. At the mobilisation stage, delivery governance structures were still emerging. Responsibilities existed conceptually at the institutional and workstream level, but accountability for specific reporting outputs and milestone ownership was not consistently anchored at the individual level. Visibility was fragmented across partner environments. Activity existed but was not captured consistently in forms that could support reliable programme-level reporting. Escalation pathways had been formally designed but had not yet been tested across the complexity of a seventeen-partner environment.

The diagnostic process preceded any redesign activity. Structured discussions were conducted separately with researchers and senior academic stakeholders because the governance absence experienced by those two groups manifested differently. Researchers experienced it primarily as a coordination problem: uncertainty around expectations, outputs, timelines, and reporting requirements. Senior academic stakeholders experienced the same condition primarily as a visibility problem: an inability to view programme activity at the whole-programme level in a form suitable for external accountability. Separating these perspectives diagnostically proved important. Combining them would have produced an account that was factually complete but analytically insufficient. Governance structures were then implemented following the diagnostic phase. A Researcher Tracker and structured reporting architecture were developed and embedded across the programme. The Researchfish submission cycle was reduced from approximately two months to under one week. Visibility improved sufficiently to support delivery against externally committed programme timelines, including the Trusted Research Environment going live on schedule in July 2025. 100% reporting compliance was maintained throughout.

## 5. What the Pattern Explains

The four environments examined in this article share almost no similarity. They span different sectors, different countries, different organisational scales, and different forms of governance obligation. The failure sequence observed across them was nevertheless recognisably consistent. That consistency matters because it suggests the failure mechanism operates at the structural rather than sector level. Governance breakdowns are often explained contextually: difficult stakeholder environments, unusual reporting obligations, leadership turnover, or sector-specific pressures. These factors matter in practice, but they do not adequately explain why similar failures recur across environments where those contextual conditions are entirely different. The recurring mechanism observed in these cases is that governance is consistently framed as a design problem before it is understood as a conditions problem. Organisations ask which framework to implement, which reporting system to introduce, and which accountability structure to redesign. The more foundational questions often remain unasked: who actually owns which accountability points, where does live information originate, and how does escalation function when real delivery risk appears.

There is a systemic reason for this inversion. Framework selection produces observable organisational action. A governance framework can be procured, named, communicated, and evaluated. Structural diagnosis produces no equivalent artefact. It requires looking at how work actually moves rather than how documentation assumes it moves, and it frequently surfaces findings that are uncomfortable to raise formally: that accountability is informally distributed rather than clearly assigned, that reporting has always been assembled after the fact because nobody was ever responsible for maintaining it live, that escalation has always worked through relationships. After all, the formal pathway was never operationally real. Klijn and Koppenjan (2016) note that governance in complex multi-actor settings is particularly prone to this displacement, because the transaction costs of coordinating across many actors create organisational pressure to install visible coordination mechanisms quickly, before the underlying conditions for coordination have been established. The research programme case examined here reflects exactly that pattern. Seventeen partner organisations, two funding regimes, and active funder obligations all create pressure to demonstrate governance is in place. That pressure works against the slower diagnostic work that determines whether the governance installed will actually function.

Müller (2009) describes governance partly through formal structures of authority and accountability. The cases examined here illustrate what occurs when those formal structures exist while the delivery realities required for them to function remain unresolved. Governance exists on paper but does not yet govern in practice.

## **6. Three Diagnostic Questions for Practitioners**

The Diagnose–Design–Sustain sequence introduced in Taneja (2026) positioned diagnosis as the first act of governance construction. The cases examined in this article suggest three practical diagnostic questions that practitioners should examine before introducing or redesigning governance systems.

### **Question 1: Can accountability be named at the individual level?**

Not at the team level. Not at the departmental level. At the individual level. If accountability requires negotiation each time governance information is required, ownership ambiguity is already present. Governance systems depend on identifiable individual ownership before they can reliably function.

### **Question 2: How long would reliable reconstruction take if reporting closed tomorrow?**

If reporting can only be assembled several days or weeks after periods close, visibility is functioning retrospectively rather than live. That delay is rarely just an information problem. It usually indicates unresolved ownership underneath.

### **Question 3: Has the escalation pathway been tested under real delivery pressure?**

Not documented. Not approved. Tested under conditions where meaningful delivery risk existed. If escalation has never been exercised under that kind of pressure, the pathway that will actually function when problems emerge is likely to be the informal one built through relationships and proximity.

Any uncomfortable answer to these questions is not evidence of behavioural failure. It is structural diagnostic evidence. That evidence should inform diagnosis before design begins.

## **7. Implications for Programme and Governance Leaders**

The most important practical implication emerging from this article is one of sequencing. When governance problems appear behavioural, low compliance, inconsistent reporting engagement, bypassed escalation pathways, and weak adoption of governance processes, practitioners should test structural explanations before assuming behavioural causes. A governance system that is consistently bypassed is often not primarily a training problem. It may be an ownership problem, a visibility problem, an escalation problem, or some combination of all three. People do not reliably engage with governance environments that require them to provide information they do not own, through visibility systems that

do not support meaningful decisions, into escalation pathways that have never been trusted in practice.

The diagnostic work described in this article is therefore relevant not only when governance frameworks are initially designed, but also when existing systems begin underperforming or when environments transition between phases, partners, or reporting obligations. One further implication follows from the cross-sector nature of the evidence. Practitioners encountering these conditions should resist assuming they reflect a uniquely dysfunctional organisation, sector, or programme. The same failure sequence appeared across highly capable environments operating under entirely different institutional conditions. The pattern recurs not because governance is unimportant, but because governance is frequently introduced before the conditions required for its adoption are established.

## **8. Conclusion**

The Diagnose–Design–Sustain sequence introduced in Taneja (2026) was originally framed in the context of funded research programme governance. Its central argument was that governance failure in those environments is structural rather than managerial, and that diagnosis must precede design if governance systems are to function in practice rather than on paper. What the cross-sector evidence examined in this article adds is a broader practical claim: the conditions that the sequence is designed to diagnose are not unique to funded research environments. Comparable governance failures emerged across environments that shared almost no institutional similarity beyond the fact that governance structures were introduced before the foundations required for those structures to function had been established.

Sectors change. The structural conditions under which governance fails often do not.

## **Limitations**

The cases examined in this article are drawn from a single practitioner's experience across multiple sectors and environments. This is a pattern observation grounded in direct delivery experience rather than a controlled empirical study. The argument being made is not that the Ownership–Visibility–Escalation sequence appears universally across all governance environments. It is that when these conditions are absent, governance failure mechanisms appear recognisably similar regardless of sector, and the intervention logic implied by those conditions becomes correspondingly consistent. Practitioners applying the diagnostic approach described here should therefore exercise contextual judgement. The conditions may recur consistently while their practical manifestations remain environment-specific.

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