Control-Oriented or Enabling Governance: Why Approving Is Not Deciding [1]

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Abstract

Many projects operate within a formally impeccable governance framework: scheduled committees, complete minutes, approved milestones, signed responsibility matrices, named sponsors. And yet, when the project needs a timely, high-quality decision, that decision does not arrive, arrives too late, or is taken elsewhere and merely ratified. This article argues that the problem does not lie in the absence of governance, but in its orientation: governance designed to control is not necessarily able to enable decisions.

The article distinguishes between control-oriented governance — aimed at verifying the conformity of documents, roles and approvals — and enabling governance — aimed at producing timely decisions, each with an owner, and at removing the obstacles that block them. It deliberately shifts the unit of analysis away from the competencies of the Project Manager and towards the governance system itself, which is where the redesign has to happen. The central argument is that even the most capable Project Manager, able to diagnose organisational misalignment with precision, remains powerless if the decision-making structure is conceived solely to control. This is the referee without a whistle: they see the infringement, but have no instrument with which to stop the game.

Through four concrete shifts — from the nominal sponsor to the active sponsor, from milestones to readiness conditions, from escalation-as-blame to escalation as a designed channel, from minutes to the decision log — the article shows how to redesign governance so that diagnosis translates into decision. It proposes metrics of decision performance, it analyses the ambivalent role of artificial intelligence, and it discusses the reasons why organisations tend to remain in control mode.

Keywords: *project governance, enabling governance, decision log, readiness conditions, sponsorship, escalation, manage by exception, decision latency, psychological safety, artificial intelligence, Public Administration.*

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1. Introduction: The Paradox of Governance Without Decision

Let us imagine a scene that mirrors the one opening many projects in crisis. The steering committee meets punctually every month. The dashboard is up to date and predominantly green. The minutes are complete. The quarter's milestones are approved. All the relevant stakeholders are present, in the room or connected remotely. To the ritual question — "are we aligned?" — the customary assent follows. On paper, the governance works.

Six months later, the project needs a decision that truly matters: reallocating capacity between two workstreams that have come into tension, accepting or rejecting a delay on a critical dependency, arbitrating between two functions that lay claim to the same specialist resource. The decision, however, does not emerge from the committee. It is sketched out in a corridor, postponed "for further analysis", picked up again in a chat, and finally ratified in a later set of minutes — by which time the useful window has already closed. The committee had met every month. It had controlled everything. It had decided nothing at the moment when the decision was needed.

This is the paradox of governance without decision. A governance framework can be formally impeccable and yet unable to produce the decisions the project needs, when it needs them. The problem is not the absence of governance: it is its orientation. Some governance systems exhaust themselves in control — verifying that the documents are there, that the milestones are ticked, that the signatures are collected — and assume that, if the formal system is in order, decisions will follow of their own accord. They do not.

Earlier work by the present author has examined the same underlying fault line from other angles: the disproportionate effect of individual behaviour on collective performance (Prinzio, 2026a); the competencies through which a Project Manager reads the real system of a project rather than its documented representation (Prinzio, 2026b); and the organisational phenomenon of false consensus, in which formal alignment conceals the absence of real alignment (Prinzio, 2026c). Each of those enquiries places the weight on the Project Manager: they must read the weak signals, negotiate interests, diagnose misalignment, manage dependencies. **This article makes the complementary and opposite move.** Because there is a limit to what a Project Manager can achieve alone: if the decision-making structure is designed solely to control, their diagnosis does not translate into decisions. The Project Manager becomes a referee without a whistle — seeing the infringement with precision, but holding no institutional instrument with which to stop the game. The diagnosis remains accurate and powerless.

For this reason, the unit of analysis shifts. No longer the competencies of the Project Manager, but **the governance system that must be redesigned**. The question is no longer "can the Project Manager diagnose misalignment?", but "is the governance built to decide, or only to control?". It is a change of subject: the protagonist here is not the person who manages the project, but the structure within which the project is decided.

The load-bearing contrast is therefore between **control-oriented governance** and **enabling governance**. It is a further variation, raised to the institutional level, of the distinction between the formal system of a project and the real system in which that project actually lives.

2. Methodological Approach

This article does not present the results of a single piece of original empirical research. It is a practice-based reflection, combining a secondary analysis of standards and professional literature with the direct observation of recurring patterns in complex project contexts: critical infrastructures, cloud platforms, cybersecurity, operational resilience, and digital transformation in Public Administration and large organisations.

On the plane of standards and governance practice, the principal references are the Project Management Institute's practice guide on the governance of portfolios, programmes and projects; the principle- and value-based, tailoring-oriented approach of the PMBOK® Guide in its seventh edition; and the manage-by-exception principle, with its associated tolerances, formalised in PRINCE2. On the plane of decision quality, the article draws on the literature concerning how decisions fail and how they can be made better (Nutt; Garvin and Roberto; Klein). On the organisational plane, the central references remain psychological safety (Edmondson), sensemaking under ambiguity (Weick), influence and power beyond formal authority (Kotter), and the specific literature on project governance (Müller).

The cases presented are anonymised and generalised. They do not refer to specific organisations, projects, suppliers or persons, but describe situations observed with sufficient frequency to be treated as recurring patterns. Their function is practical: to offer a recognition schema and a repertoire of redesigns, not a universal taxonomy nor a statistically representative sample.

3. Control-Oriented Governance and Enabling Governance

Every complex project has governance: the set of bodies, roles, rules and rituals through which the decisions that steer the project are — or are not — taken. The distinction proposed here does not concern the presence or absence of governance, but its implicit purpose.

Control-oriented governance has as its prevailing purpose the verification of conformity. It optimises traceability, auditability, and the formal coverage of responsibilities. Its guiding question is: “Has it been approved? Has the milestone been reached? Does the document exist?”. It is the purest expression of the formal system of a project. It is necessary: without control there is no organisational memory, no documentable accountability, no possibility of audit — indispensable conditions, above all in Public Administration and in regulated sectors. Its limitation is not what it does, but what it presumes: that controlling the artefacts automatically guarantees the production of decisions. It treats the decision as a by-product of control. And a decision is not a by-product: it is an act that must be designed.

Enabling governance has as its purpose the production of timely, high-quality decisions, each with an owner, and the removal of the obstacles that block them. It is measured not by how complete the documentation is, but by whether — and how quickly — the decisions the project needed were actually taken. It does not abolish control: it subordinates control to enablement. Control remains the instrument; enablement becomes the end.

The point is not to choose between the two, as though control were an evil and enablement a good. The point is to recognise that control is necessary but insufficient, and that a governance model weighted towards one side — verifying — leaves the other side — deciding — uncovered. Control-oriented governance verifies that the formal system is in order; enabling governance takes responsibility for ensuring that the real system can decide and act. The table below summarises the contrast along the dimensions that matter.

Dimension	Control-oriented governance	Enabling governance
Implicit purpose	Verifying the conformity of documents, roles and approvals	Producing timely decisions and removing obstacles
Guiding question	“Has it been approved?”	“Do the conditions exist to decide and act?”
Role of the committee	Ratification and oversight	The place where decisions are made and blockers removed
Role of the sponsor	Signature and nominal presence	Contribution, arbitration, removal of obstacles

Dimension	Control-oriented governance	Enabling governance
Gate criterion	Progress at a planned date	Verifiable readiness
Treatment of escalation	An unwelcome exception, often late	A designed channel, triggered by threshold
Memory	Minutes: what was said	Decision log: what was chosen and why
Bad news	A risk for whoever raises it	Input for better decisions
Relationship with the Project Manager	Asks them for reports	Gives them real authority to act

4. The Symptoms of Control-Oriented Governance

When governance exhausts itself in control, the governing bodies do not disappear: they remain visible, often even abundant. They meet, update, minute, approve. But progressively they lose the capacity to affect decisions. The symptoms that follow are recognisable, and they concern the governing structure, not the individual Project Manager.

The rubber-stamp committee. The committee meets, takes note, ratifies. But it is not the place where decisions are made. The real decision takes shape elsewhere — in informal bilaterals, in exchanges between sponsors, in the corridor — and the committee records it after the fact. The body that should govern ends up certifying choices already made without its contribution.

The nominal sponsor. The name is on the charter, the presence is formal, but the sponsor spends no political capital, does not arbitrate conflicts between functions, does not remove the obstacles that only their authority could remove. They have nominal authority without political energy. The project has a patron on paper and an orphan in reality.

The ceremonial gate. The milestone is "passed" on a given date because the plan foresees it, not because verifiable conditions have been satisfied. The gate certifies the calendar, not readiness. A go-live is declared because the go-live date has arrived, regardless of whether whoever inherits the solution is able to operate it.

Escalation as blame. Raising a problem to the level above is experienced as an admission of failure by the Project Manager or the team. As a result, escalation is delayed until the options have narrowed and the cost of recovery has risen. The governance model has not defined a threshold that makes escalation a mandatory and neutral action; it has left it as a discretionary gesture, and therefore a socially costly one.

The decision without an owner. Matters are "discussed", "shared", "monitored". But no one leaves the meeting with a decision, a name and a date. The most frequent outcome is an action to "look into it further". The meeting produces the impression of governance without its substance.

Decision debt. Postponed decisions accumulate silently, like a debt. Each individual postponement appears prudent; the sum of the postponements is paralysis. Unlike technical debt, decision debt is rarely measured — and what is not measured tends to grow undisturbed.

Evaporating memory. The minutes record what was said, not what was chosen or why. Months later, no one can reconstruct the rationale for a decision, the alternatives discarded, the assumptions accepted, the risks knowingly taken. People change roles, key contacts rotate, and newcomers reopen decisions already closed or inherit their weight without understanding the reasons.

The table that cannot hear bad news. Psychological safety is often discussed at the level of the team. But it is needed just as much — and perhaps more — at the governance table. A committee that reacts harshly to whoever raises a risk, turning the problem into personal blame, blinds itself: it stops receiving the very information it most needs, precisely when that information matters most.

5. The Four Shifts Towards Enablement

Moving from control to enablement does not require abolishing the governing bodies, but redesigning some of their central mechanisms. The four shifts that follow act on the points where control-oriented governance does the most damage. For each, we describe the problem in control mode, the institutional redesign, and a concrete case. A preliminary caveat is essential: these shifts do not ask the Project Manager to be more capable. They redesign the table so that the Project Manager's capability has somewhere to take effect.

5.1 From the Nominal Sponsor to the Active Sponsor

In control mode, the sponsor is a name on the charter: present at the gates, absent in the interval between them, called upon to sign rather than to intervene. When the project needs someone to arbitrate a priority conflict between two functions, or to remove an obstacle that no lower level can remove, the nominal sponsor is not there — not because they are physically absent, but because their role has never been defined in terms of what they must do.

The redesign consists in transforming sponsorship from a title into a role with explicit, verifiable obligations. Not "the sponsor approves", but "the sponsor commits to: arbitrating priority conflicts between functions within a defined time; being reachable for decisions that exceed the Project Manager's tolerances; removing formally flagged obstacles; spending their political capital when the project requires it". Sponsorship becomes a mandate with its own deliverables, whose execution is verified at every gate like any other project responsibility. Kotter reminds us that managerial power derives not from the title but from the ability to activate relationships and dependencies: making that ability an explicit obligation is what distinguishes the active sponsor from the nominal patron.

Case 1 – The sponsor who approved without arbitrating. In a transformation programme, two business units laid claim to the same specialist team, indispensable to both in the same months. The sponsor signed every gate but never entered the conflict, considering it "an operational matter". The programme lurched between competing priorities: the team was pulled back and forth between the two business units week after week, and delays accumulated without anyone having the authority to decide precedence. The redesign did not concern the Project Manager, but the sponsor's mandate: arbitrating priority conflicts between functions, within five working days of the conflict being flagged, became an explicit obligation of the sponsor, verified at every gate. The conflict did not disappear, but it acquired a place and a time in which to be decided.

5.2 From Milestones to Readiness Conditions

In control mode, the milestone coincides with a date and a delivered artefact: at that date, the document exists; therefore, the gate is passed. But a delivered artefact is not an available capability. An approved disaster recovery plan is not a tested disaster recovery capability; a formally trained team is not necessarily able to operate the solution at three in the morning.

The redesign replaces the calendar gate with a readiness gate: the gate is passed not on a date, but when a set of verifiable conditions has been satisfied. Not "DR plan approved", but "DR exercised with a documented outcome"; not "backup scheduled", but "restore verified"; not "training delivered", but "at least two people have operated the solution in a simulation". Readiness checks of this kind are frequently proposed as diagnostic instruments available to the Project Manager. The shift proposed here operates at a different level: **readiness becomes the formal criterion of the gate, a property of the governance system rather than of individual diligence**. It is the move from a heroic check entrusted to whoever happens to hold the role to an institutional rule that does not depend on who that person is.

Case 2 – The go-live decided by the calendar. A platform was ready according to the project team's criteria: installed, configured, tested in the laboratory. The go-live gate was fixed at a date. The team that would inherit operations, however, had neither updated runbooks nor tested escalation procedures. In control mode, the go-live would have been declared anyway. The redesign redefined the gate as a set of readiness conditions verified not by the project team — which has an interest in closing — but by the operations team, endowed with a right of veto over passing the gate. The go-live ceased to be a date on the plan and became a state of the real system.

5.3 From Escalation-as-Blame to Escalation as a Designed Channel

In control mode, escalation is an unwelcome exception. Culturally, raising a problem upwards is equated with admitting an inability to solve it. The result is predictable: escalation happens late, when margins have narrowed. The problem is not the timidity of individuals, but a design flaw: the governance model has never defined when escalation is mandatory, leaving it as a discretionary gesture and therefore a socially risky one.

The redesign draws on the manage-by-exception principle. Governance defines, at each level, explicit tolerances on time, cost, scope, quality and risk. Within tolerance, the Project Manager decides autonomously, without having to justify themselves. When a tolerance is exceeded, escalation is not a choice but a mandatory and automatic action, prescribed by the rule. This separates the act of raising the problem from any judgement about the person: whoever escalates is not confessing a failure, they are applying the rule. Governance has pre-authorised the channel, and in doing so has made timely escalation possible without reputational cost.

Case 3 – The known issue escalated too late. In a critical-system upgrade project, a technical problem had been known to the team for weeks, but did not appear in the official meetings: in the past, whoever brought bad news had come away carrying personal responsibility for the problem. When the issue finally surfaced, there was insufficient time to recover. The redesign did not ask the team to be braver: it introduced explicit tolerances and a rule whereby exceeding a threshold obliges escalation within a defined number of days. Escalation became a compliance obligation rather than an accusation — and therefore became timely.

5.4 From Minutes to the Decision Log

In control mode, the memory of the project is the minutes: they record what was said, who was present, which points were "discussed". But minutes do not preserve what really matters: what was decided, by whom, with what rationale, which alternatives were discarded, which assumptions and risks were knowingly accepted, and by when the decision is to be reviewed.

The redesign introduces the decision log as the official system of record for governance decisions. For every relevant decision the following are captured: the subject, the owner, the date, the rationale, the alternatives considered, the assumptions and risks accepted, and any review deadline. A decision log is frequently recommended as good practice that a diligent Project Manager may choose to keep. The shift proposed here again operates at a different level: **the decision log becomes a formal governance record, with a named owner, defined updating rules and a standing place on the committee's agenda** — part of the structure rather than of individual discipline. It is the antidote both to decision debt, because it makes due and overdue decisions visible, and to evaporating memory, because it preserves the rationale when people change.

Case 4 – The programme that kept reopening the same decisions. In a multi-year programme with a high turnover of contacts, every new stakeholder tended to reopen decisions already taken — not out of bad faith, but because the rationale had been lost: the minutes recorded that a choice had been made, not why. Once the decision log was maintained as a formal record with a named owner, the reasons, assumptions and accepted risks behind each decision could be reconstructed in minutes. Reopenings fell sharply, and with them the time spent revisiting matters that had already been settled.

The four shifts share a logic. None of them asks the Project Manager to be more heroic. All of them redesign the structure so that the decision — which under pure control depends on the goodwill and diligence of individuals — becomes a property of the system. This is the reversal: not a Project Manager who diagnoses better, but a governance system that, having granted the Project Manager real authority to act, at last makes the diagnosis effective.

6. Measuring Governance: Decision Quality and Latency

If an organisation measures only delivery — time, cost, scope — its governance will optimise control, because that is what is observed and rewarded. To make enablement real, the decision performance of the governance system itself must be measured. Some indicators are practicable without building new bureaucracy.

Decision latency. The time between the emergence of an issue requiring a decision and the actual decision, with an owner and a date. It is the most revealing indicator: governance that decides well but slowly still loses the useful windows.

Decision debt. The number and the age of postponed decisions. A queue of decisions that ages is an early warning signal, often more reliable than the classic progress indicators.

Decision density of meetings. The proportion of governance meetings that produce explicit decisions — with an owner and a deadline — as opposed to those that merely take note. A committee whose meetings exhaust themselves in updates is a rubber-stamp committee.

Escalation lead time. The time between a tolerance being exceeded and the issue reaching the competent level. It measures whether the escalation channel, once designed, actually works.

Reopening rate. The frequency with which decisions already closed are reopened. It is a proxy for the quality of decision memory: if decisions do not hold, it is often because their rationale was never preserved.

A caveat applies, the same that accompanies every behavioural metric: these indicators should be discussed with those who govern the project, not used as a punitive instrument. And above all, measuring latency does not reduce latency if the committee is unwilling to decide. The metric enables courage; it does not replace it. A governance system that measures its own slowness and does nothing to correct it has simply added a dashboard to its paralysis.

7. Artificial Intelligence and Governance

Artificial intelligence enters the governance of projects through two opposing doors, and its effect depends entirely on which kind of governance it finds waiting for it.

On the one hand, AI perfects the production of control artefacts. Automatically generated minutes, always up-to-date dashboards, preliminary classification of risks, instant status summaries. The risk is subtle: AI can make precisely the wrong governance look impeccable. **A governance system that does not decide, equipped with artificial intelligence, becomes a governance system that still does not decide, but with magnificent dashboards.** It automates the representation of the problem, not the capacity to address it. The rubber-stamp committee, empowered by AI, produces minutes faster and decides exactly as much as before: nothing.

On the other hand, AI can serve enablement, if directed at the right mechanisms. It can track decision latency and make decision debt visible. It can keep the decision log alive and queryable, retrieving in seconds the rationale and assumptions behind a past decision. It can flag due and overdue decisions, highlight tolerances close to being breached, and make it hard to ignore that a decision is necessary. In this use, AI does not decide: it makes it impossible to pretend that there is nothing to decide.

An insurmountable limit remains, however. AI does not own a decision, because it does not carry the accountability that accompanies one. It does not arbitrate a power conflict between functions. It does not supply the political capital of a sponsor. It does not find the courage to state, before the committee, that the real risk to the project is the absence of sponsorship. The decision remains an act of human responsibility. AI amplifies whichever governance it finds: it strengthens the governance that wants to decide, and merely dresses up the governance that only wants to control.

8. Why Organisations Remain in Control Mode (and What to Do)

If enablement is so evidently preferable, why do so many organisations remain in control mode? The answer is not ignorance. It is an interweaving of incentives, culture and structure. **Incentives.** Control is defensible after the fact: "the process was followed, the documents produced, the meetings held". Deciding, by contrast, exposes. Whoever controls is never wrong alone; whoever decides can be. In an environment that punishes error more than it rewards a timely decision, control is the rational survival strategy.

Audit and compliance culture. In Public Administration and regulated sectors, the pressure to demonstrate conformity is strong and legitimate. But if conformity becomes the sole metric of success, the organisation rewards the artefact over the result: what counts is that the document exists, not that the decision is a good one.

Diffusion of responsibility. A collective committee, if poorly designed, dilutes accountability. "We decided together" often means "no one decided". Collegiality, intended to share judgement, ends up dissolving it.

Conflict aversion. Deciding means disappointing someone; ratifying does not. Governance that avoids conflict systematically chooses ratification, and postpones conflicts until they become crises.

Overcoming these barriers requires interventions on the structure, not exhortations to individuals. Some lines of action have proven effective in high-complexity contexts.

1. Redefine the committee's mandate around decisions. Every meeting has an agenda of decisions to be taken, not only of statuses to be updated, and concludes with decisions, owners and dates. Status updating, where possible, happens beforehand and elsewhere.

2. Formalise the sponsorship mandate. Verifiable obligations in place of a name on the charter, so that the decision does not depend on the initiative of the individual Project Manager.

3. Replace calendar gates with readiness gates. Verifiable conditions as the criterion for passing, assessed by those who will inherit the result.

4. Pre-authorise tolerances and the escalation channel. Make escalation a mandatory and neutral action, decoupled from any judgement about the person.

5. Establish the decision log as the official system of record for governance decisions. With a named owner and defined updating rules, rather than as the Project Manager's personal diary.

6. Introduce the premortem before major gates. The technique proposed by Klein — "let us imagine that in six months this project has failed: why?" — institutionalises the consideration of bad news before it becomes irreversible, bringing psychological safety to the governance table and not only to the team.

7. Size the governance to the context. The PMBOK tailoring principle applies to governance as well: not too much control for small initiatives, not too little enablement for critical projects. Governance is sized to the project, not applied uniformly.

None of these actions, on its own, transforms control-oriented governance into enabling governance. Together, they begin to shift the informal incentives that today reward those who verify and penalise those who decide.

9. Conclusion

Projects fail in the presence of good methodologies for many reasons, and one of the least examined is this: the governance that was supposed to steer them was built to verify rather than to decide. The formal system was in order. The real system was waiting for a decision that never came.

The consequence is uncomfortable for anyone who believes that better project management alone is the answer. **Even the most capable Project Manager — one who diagnoses misalignment perfectly, reads the weak signals, manages the dependencies — remains powerless if the governance is designed solely to control.** A referee is of no use if the rulebook does not grant them the right to blow the whistle. Enabling governance is what turns diagnosis into decision: the active sponsor gives authority to arbitration, the readiness gate makes progression evidence-based, the designed escalation gives the problem a channel, and the decision log gives the choice a memory.

There is a further reason why this shift matters now. Governance that can decide is a precondition of resilience. In cloud- and AI-driven contexts, where the unforeseen is not the exception but the norm, a system that cannot decide under stress will not be able to adapt when the plan collapses. Resilience is not a technical property of infrastructure: it is the capacity of a governing system to decide well, and quickly, precisely when the conditions that were foreseen fall away. Control-oriented governance, however impeccable, tends to ratify the disaster only once the useful decision window has closed. Enabling governance confronts it while there is still a decision to be made.

Ultimately, governance is not measured by how much it controls, but by how much — and how quickly — it is able to decide.

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Note on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this article, artificial intelligence tools were used to assist in translation from Italian to English, in linguistic revision and in the organisation of the text. All substantive content, analyses, arguments and conclusions are the work of the author, who retains full responsibility for the originality, accuracy and validity of the work presented.

Note on Anonymisation

The cases described in this article are anonymised and generalised. They do not refer to specific organisations, projects, suppliers or persons. They are situations observable in many complex projects and have been formulated generically to allow their analysis without reference to identifiable contexts.

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