

Intelligent Governance : Smart Gateways and Sharp Communications



Introduction

The need for programme governance has never been greater, yet it is so often seen as unnecessary red tape: Programme Managers just want to get on with delivering stuff, they don't want to get bogged down in administration.

Yet every programme has a number of key decision and review points, where the continued viability of the programme needs to be confirmed by the Sponsor and key stakeholders. The old "I've started so I'll finish" argument just isn't good enough anymore (not that it ever was actually).

This creates a tension between the delivery organisation and the governance bodies.



And as we all know, the consequences of not doing good, intelligent governance can be extreme: loss of reputation, loss of jobs or even the entire business.

Smart Gateways

A Gateway (or Stage Gate, Quality Gate, Checkpoint etc) is a scheduled, formal review of the programme. These key decision/review points need to be effective, smart, appropriate to the risk profile of the programme, and must have teeth: "do not pass this Gateway" must be a permissible outcome.



Good Gateways look backwards and look forwards:

- Have we done what we said we were going to do, to the agreed level of quality, cost and time?
- Now we know what we know, can we move ahead with a viable, sensible and achievable plan?

Programme Gateways – an example

Here is an example from a change programme that decided to hold 6 Gateways during its life. Actually, that's not quite true – the programme lasted 4 years and held Gate 3 meetings at the end of every tranche and/or every 6 months during the Deliver phase of the programme. It followed the Managing Successful Programmes (MSP®) approach.

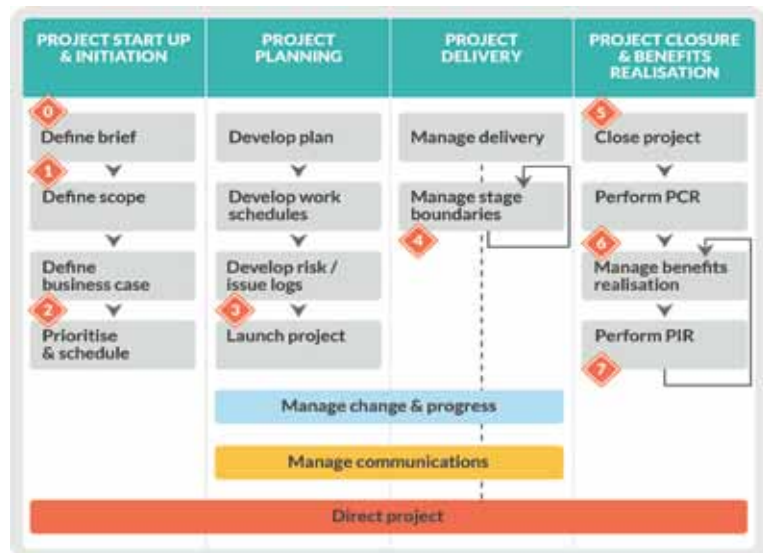


Project Gateways – an example

Here is an example from the change projects that were completed during the Deliver phase of the overall change programme.

The Gateway questions at project level are similar to those asked at programme level (e.g. is the project still viable) but with an additional check to ensure that the project continues to support the overall programme Blueprint.

Participation in these project Gateways was mostly from within the project delivery team but did include the Programme Manager and often the Business Change Manager too.



The Gateway process itself

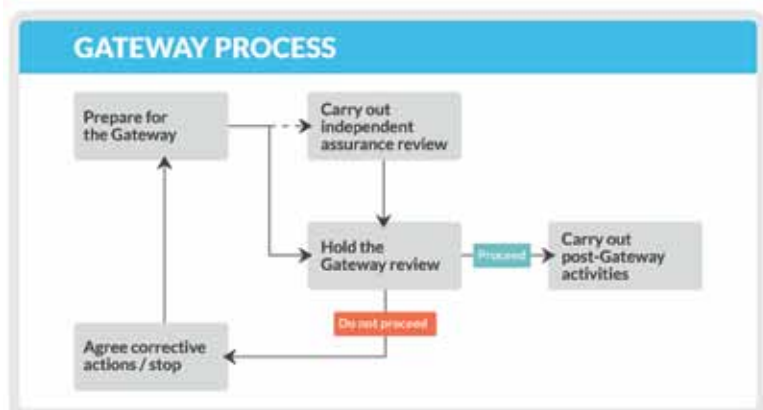
Gateways don't just happen by magic (even when they are scheduled into the plan). Like any other process, Gateways need pre-work and post work, as illustrated in this high-level process model.

Gateways with teeth – permissible outcomes

The outcome of a Gateway should be one of:

- Proceed to next Gateway with caveats : some corrective actions required
- Proceed to next Gateway : no corrective actions required
- Do not proceed – Fix : some corrective actions required and the Gateway must be repeated
- Do not proceed - Terminate : programme should be stopped (or re-scoped)

Do not proceed must be a permissible outcome – if it is not permissible and the programme is going to proceed regardless of what is discovered then there is probably no point in holding the Gateway at all.



Come on – this is completely un-Agile !!

A common objection to using a Gateways approach is that it goes against the Agile tenets of flexibility, responsiveness and focus on delivering desired business outcomes. But our experience is that this objection just does not hold up in practice:

- Agile programmes and projects still require governance, still require oversight, and are still asked “are you still doing the right stuff, in the right way, to the agreed level of quality and, by the way, are you spending my money wisely?”
- The culture of Gateways is actually entirely aligned with Agile which makes extensive use of Retrospectives to improve future outcomes. Agile emphasises the option of not proceeding or proceeding in a different way (in Agile any requirement can be varied or added before the start of a sprint/iteration) and it emphasises a business based decision in the next iteration by the Product Owner who is committed to future success of the product.

The programme’s Governance Approach defines how to apply necessary and sufficient governance controls to satisfy the Governance Board and Key Stakeholders, irrespective of whether it uses Agile techniques or not.

Smart Gateways have been proven to work for all types of change programme. The diagram below illustrates how one organisation applied Gateways to a programme that actively used Agile development approaches within a Scaled Agile Framework.



One size does not fit all – Governance Approach

Does every programme and every project need to pass through every Gateway? No. Although there are a few organisations who insist on this, normally the Gateways are chosen according to the characteristics of the piece of work. For example, high risk/cost work would require more Gateways than low risk/cost work.

The main key to running smart, nimble, effective, impactful and successful Gateways is to define a Governance Approach for the programme, which answers the following questions:

- How many Gateways do we need / want (and what’s the minimum we can get away with)?
- What’s the purpose of each Gateway?
- Who participates in each Gateway?
- Who makes the pass / do not pass decision?
- What questions need to be asked in order to make decision?
- How much prep is needed for each Gateway (and what’s the minimum we can get away with)?

Sharp Communications

Intelligent Governance includes ensuring that your stakeholders are informed (and consulted) about the status of the programme, that they are involved (as required) in the Gateways and that they are always informed about the Gateway decisions and the progress towards achieving the desired outcomes.

The golden rules for sharp, effective communications are:

- Don’t assume people know what’s happening, inform them
- Just because you have done something it doesn’t mean anybody else is interested, so only provide information when it is useful to the recipient
- Always focus on the outcomes, not (just) the outputs
- Don’t just talk at them, listen to their feedback
- Set up a communications drumbeat so that people become accustomed to receiving information



Conclusion

The need for good governance of programmes isn’t going away, so we have to find intelligent ways to do it. Smart Gateways are a proven powerful, flexible and sustainable technique that forms part of many modern organisations’ ways-of-working. As well as providing insights into the viability and the quality of the programme, they support focussed and sharp communications with your key stakeholders.

For further information on Smart Gateways and supporting tools, please contact: info@bestoutcome.com

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