Programme Recovery

When to Rescue, When to Renew

Introduction

Programme recovery is an art that requires careful consideration, analysis, and tough decisions. As a small boutique management consultancy, we understand that programmes can sometimes struggle, leaving you wondering whether it's worth investing more time, money, and resources into trying to recover them.

In this article, we'll explore the crucial decision of when to continue investing in a struggling programme versus when it's time to abandon ship. We'll provide guidance on when to hold onto your programme and try to revive it versus when it's best to cut losses and start anew.

"Understanding the value drivers associated with the cost of each activity of a programme is essential. The decision making tree is helped by these elements to prioritise work-streams that deliver value quickly and propel a programme of works forward with momentum" – Mark West

Context

It's typical to be at the end of the first year of a transformational programme plan without seeing actual change. Due to the scale and type of programmes and portfolios, it can be almost impossible to see change affecting users early on, mostly due to dependencies in the programme plan. An agile mindset and approach can be of use within programmes but is not appropriate everywhere.

Hence, it's common for stakeholders to become nervous as time moves on and the only changes they're seeing are the negative financial impact of the programme and the need to continually tie up more of their staff in the programme rather than focusing on the operation that they're employed for.

So when should programme boards decide to change tack or pull the plug?

Evaluate Direction

Before deciding on the future of the programme, we need to assess whether it's heading in the right direction.

This is about alignment. Does the programme align to the portfolio and the corporate strategic goals? Is the programme showing either progress towards those goals or a clear route to moving the needle once it's implemented?

If the programme has a clear direction and the programme as a whole is moving in that direction, then there's a good indication that the programme will be salvageable.

It's important to note, that at this stage, we're not evaluating the progress of each project. It's not uncommon to see projects progressing well but not aligned to the programme. A good indication of this being a problem is when transition states have not been defined. For example, has the programme defined what the operation will look like at any point in time?

All too often, programmes are seen as a collection of projects on a common theme and they miss out the coordination aspect so crucial to transformation programmes. For example, are the projects delivery dates aligned with each other so that the receiving operation has the ability to plan and react to changes?

Points to Consider

Direction

Is the programme aligned to corporate objectives? Do the senior stakeholders acknowledge that alignment?

Transition States

Has the programme engaged with the receiving business operation to define when changes will happen and what the operation will look like at any point in time?

Progress

Has the programme set out how its progress can be measured? Recognising that value may not appear for multiple years, this cannot be solely a financial metric

When to Engage and Rescue

Assuming that the programme is in need of assistance and is displaying signs of being aligned, then there are multiple strands of activities to recover it, but first we need to look for signs that indicate the programme might still be worth rescuing:

Significant programme value: If the programme has significant strategic importance or potential benefits, it may be worth investing in recovery efforts. This could include programmes that align with your organisation's overall goals and objectives.

Strong stakeholder engagement: When stakeholders are committed and invested in the programme's success, it's often possible to recover and move forward. This could include clients, customers, or other key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the programme's success.

Identifiable root causes: If the programme's issues can be pinpointed and addressed through corrective actions, it might be feasible to recover the programme. This could involve implementing changes to the programme's scope, timeline, or resources.

Clear direction: If the programme has a clear direction and the programme as a whole is moving in that direction (i.e. not just individual projects, but the entirety of the change), then there's a good indication that the programme will be salvageable.

Likely Salvageable

Some examples of programmes that might still be worth holding onto include:

- A multi-year ERP replacement programme struggling with many project strands, appearing uncoordinated but with a focus on technology rather than business delivery.

- Conflicting/colliding programmes across a change portfolio, creating some confusion in otherwise positive and supportive stakeholders. The individual programmes may be progressing well, but the combination isn't working well.

- A training initiative that has faced resistance from employees but could be salvaged through improved communication and engagement strategies.

When to Close the Programme

On the other hand, there are situations where a programme is unlikely to recover. Here are some signs that indicate it might be time to fold:

Irreversible damage: When the programme has suffered irreversible damage or irreparable harm to its stakeholders, reputation, or resources.

Lack of stakeholder support: If stakeholders have lost trust or confidence in the programme, it may be difficult to recover and regain momentum.

Infeasible recovery plan: When a thorough analysis reveals that recovering the programme would require unrealistic changes, expenditure, resource commitments, or timelines.

Folding does not mean giving up, it has more to do with recognising that the programme in its current form is not viable. Often the required outcomes will still exist and a new programme will need to be initiated to achieve those outcomes, so creating a clear separation is essential. Otherwise, it will be viewed as the same programme with a different name.

Likely Not Salvageable

Some examples of programmes that might not be worth holding onto include:

- A launch campaign that has been marred by negative publicity and social media backlash.

- A business change programme, but forthcoming legislation will render it ineffective or potentially illegal.

- A long-term transformation programme that has internally been received so badly by stakeholders that they refuse to engage further.

Guidelines for Making Tough Decisions

When faced with a struggling programme, it's essential to take a step back and assess the situation objectively. Here are some guidelines to help you make tough decisions:

1. **Conduct an objective assessment**: Perform a thorough review of the programme's viability, risks, and potential benefits.

2. **Establish clear criteria:** Develop and communicate clear criteria for when to hold onto or fold a struggling programme.

3. **Involve stakeholders:** Engage with stakeholders to ensure everyone is aligned and informed about the decision-making process.

By following these guidelines, you can make data-driven decisions that prioritise stakeholder value and programme success.

Conclusion

Programme recovery requires careful consideration, analysis, and sometimes tough decisions. By understanding when to hold onto or fold a struggling programme, you can avoid costly mistakes and invest in programmes that are likely to succeed. Remember to conduct an objective assessment, establish clear criteria, and involve stakeholders to ensure that your decision-making process is fair, transparent, and effective.

As a boutique management consultancy, we're here to support you every step of the way. Whether you need help recovering a struggling programme or starting anew, we'll work with you to develop strategies and solutions tailored to your needs and goals.

Westward Brooks

We help organisations to join the dots from board ambition to technology reality

We specialise in four core areas:

- Board and Executive Advisory, Mentoring and Coaching
- Strategic Consultancy and Operating Model Design
- Igniting Innovation within Organisations
- Portfolio and Programme Rescue

Mark West

Mark has held business and technology C-suite and board positions in a variety of global companies

He has repeatedly designed and introduced new target operating models to enable organisations (typically £250M+ T/O) to embrace digital innovation

Alan Ward

Alan is a highly experienced, sector-agnostic business-focused architect.

He designs operating architectures and operating models that enable organisations to run efficiently and effectively using the available toolset

Simon Brooks

Simon is a founder of a multi-award-winning IT Managed Services and Consultancy business;

He has experienced all aspects of owning and running a flourishing business. From start-up to successful exit via MBO, he has been exposed to most of the problems you're likely to face

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