



## The Five Mistakes Mid-Market Programme Leaders Make (And How to Avoid Them)

### Introduction

Mid-market organisations are caught in a governance gap.

They're too large to operate on startup informality. Five people in a room making decisions by consensus doesn't work when you have 500 employees and a £3 million transformation programme.

Yet they're too small to implement enterprise-scale governance. A formal steering committee with monthly reviews and 50-page project documents feels bureaucratic and slows things down.

So mid-market leaders navigate the middle. They try to be "lean and agile" while managing scale and complexity. And they make predictable mistakes that derail programmes.

After 20 years working with FTSE100 and mid-market organisations, I've seen these mistakes repeatedly. This article identifies the five most common ones and shows you how to avoid them.

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### Mistake 1: Treating Programme Leadership as a Part-Time Role

#### The Error:

A mid-market organisation launches a digital transformation programme. They appoint a Programme Manager (or Programme Director), but the role is one of many responsibilities.

The person also manages operations. Or leads their functional team. Or reports into a role that already has a full workload.

The result: The programme gets 60% of their time and attention. When operational fires break out, the programme gets deprioritised.

#### Why This Happens in Mid-Market:

Enterprise organisations budget full-time programme leadership. They hire a full-time Programme Director and give them 50+ direct reports.

Mid-market organisations think they're "not big enough for that." A £2-5 million programme gets managed part-time by someone already stretched across other responsibilities.

### **The Impact:**

- **Decision delays:** The programme lead is unavailable when decisions are needed. Escalations wait days or weeks.
- **Scope drift:** No one is enforcing scope discipline. Changes get approved informally without baseline adjustments.
- **Stakeholder misalignment:** The programme lead doesn't have time to manage stakeholder communication. Different groups get different information.
- **Risk becomes crisis:** Problems that could be managed early become crises because they weren't monitored.

### **How to Avoid It:**

Treat programme leadership as a full-time role. This doesn't mean hiring a full-time permanent employee. It means:

- **Dedicated focus:** One person owns the programme 100%. They have no other responsibilities during the programme lifecycle.
- **External support:** Hire a fractional programme director if you don't have internal capacity. This is often cheaper than the cost of a failed programme.
- **Escalation authority:** Give the programme lead the authority to escalate to the CFO or CEO when needed.
- **Decision accountability:** Make them accountable for programme outcomes. Not just "managing the plan," but "delivering results."

A mid-market organisation we worked with had a Programme Manager handling programme direction at 60% and operations management at 40%. We recommended splitting the roles. They hired a fractional Programme Director for the transformation (12 months) and maintained operations management separately.

Result: The programme recovered three weeks of lost schedule within the first month because decisions could be made immediately.

## **Mistake 2: Allowing Scope to Grow Without Explicit Approval**

### **The Error:**

A mid-market retailer launches a supply chain transformation. Initial scope covers inventory management and procurement systems. Budget: £2 million. Timeline: 12 months.

By month six, the programme has absorbed:

- Logistics optimisation (original scope? unclear)
- Supplier portal implementation (someone asked for it, no one said no)
- Warehouse management system upgrade (related to supply chain, might as well do it)
- Staff training programme (if we're changing processes, people need training)

Total scope growth: 40%. Budget and timeline unchanged.

### **Why This Happens in Mid-Market:**

Enterprise governance has rigid change control. Change requests go through a formal board, budgets adjust, timelines slip, and stakeholders see it explicitly.

Mid-market organisations avoid formal change control because it feels bureaucratic. So changes happen informally. Someone asks. No one explicitly says no. Scope grows without anyone deciding it should.

### **The Impact:**

- **Budget overruns:** 40% scope growth with fixed budget means either cost overruns or quality cuts.
- **Timeline slips:** Timelines slip because no one explicitly adjusted them.
- **Stakeholder frustration:** Some stakeholders get what they wanted (new scope). Others feel the programme is bloated and unfocused.
- **Accountability disappears:** No one made a decision to expand scope, so no one is accountable when budgets exceed.

### **How to Avoid It:**

Establish explicit scope governance. This doesn't require complex processes:

1. **Baseline scope:** Document what's in scope and out of scope at the start. Get sign-off.
2. **Change request process:** When scope changes are proposed, make them visible and explicit. Even a one-page change request with impact on budget and timeline works.
3. **Change review board:** A simple rule: "Changes go to the CIO for approval." No formal committee needed, but someone decides.
4. **Budget and timeline adjustment:** When scope changes, adjust budget and timeline. Make this visible to stakeholders.
5. **Regular scope review:** Monthly check-in: "Is scope still what we agreed?" If changes are creeping in, address them.

A mid-market financial services organisation we worked with had no formal change control. Scope had grown 60% by month four. We introduced a simple rule: "Any change needs one-page approval from the CFO with impact analysis."

Result: Scope growth stopped. In fact, the organisation realised 15% of the added scope wasn't actually needed and removed it. Budget overrun was avoided.

### **Mistake 3: Confusing Accountability with Responsibility**

#### **The Error:**

A mid-market organisation structures the programme with:

- Project Manager: responsible for delivering tasks on time
- Business Analyst: responsible for requirements
- Technical Lead: responsible for technical decisions
- Steering Committee: responsible for governance

Everyone is responsible for something. No one is accountable for the outcome.

When the programme slips, multiple people explain why it's not their fault. The Project Manager says requirements were late. The Business Analyst says technical constraints weren't communicated. The Technical Lead says scope was unclear.

All true. But no single person was accountable for fixing it.

#### **Why This Happens in Mid-Market:**

Distributed accountability feels safer. It spreads risk. No one person can be blamed if things go wrong.

But programmes don't deliver outcomes by committee. They deliver outcomes when one person owns the result and is measured against it.

#### **The Impact:**

- **Slow decision-making:** Decisions require consensus from multiple accountable parties. This slows everything down.
- **Finger-pointing:** When problems emerge, multiple people have excuses.
- **No clear recovery path:** If the programme is struggling, who owns fixing it?
- **Low execution speed:** No one has authority to make calls without consensus.

#### **How to Avoid It:**

Establish clear single accountability:

1. **\*\*One person owns the outcome:\*\*** The Programme Director is accountable for delivering the programme on time, within budget, and meeting business objectives. Not "managing" the programme, but owning the result.
2. **\*\*Others are responsible for specific deliverables:\*\*** The Project Manager is responsible for task delivery. The Technical Lead is responsible for technical quality. But they report to the Programme Director, who is accountable for the outcome.
3. **\*\*Clear escalation:\*\*** When decisions are needed, the Programme Director makes them. If the decision goes above their head, that's an escalation, not an avoidance of accountability.
4. **\*\*Measure accountability:\*\*** The Programme Director's performance is measured on programme outcomes: schedule, budget, quality, stakeholder satisfaction.

A mid-market healthcare organisation had five-person steering committee sharing accountability. When the programme slipped, everyone had excuses. We restructured: one Programme Director was accountable for outcomes. Others reported to them.

Result: Decision speed improved 50%. When problems arose, there was one person who owned fixing them. The programme recovered schedule within 8 weeks.

#### **Mistake 4: Skipping Stakeholder Alignment and Living with the Consequences**

**The Error:**

A mid-market organisation starts a digital transformation. The CEO wants speed ("we need to move fast to stay competitive"). The CFO wants cost control ("we need to stay within budget"). The COO wants low disruption ("we can't disrupt operations while we're in peak season").

These goals are in tension:

- Speed + cost control = cuts to quality or scope
- Speed + low disruption = higher cost (premium resources, overtime)
- Cost control + low disruption = slower timeline

But the organisation never explicitly discusses these trade-offs. Each leader assumes their priority is the priority.

By month four:

- The CEO is frustrated with pace ("why is this taking so long?")
- The CFO is frustrated with costs ("we're already over budget")
- The COO is frustrated with disruption ("this is impacting operations")

The programme is stalled because leadership isn't aligned.

## **Why This Happens in Mid-Market:**

Enterprise organisations run stakeholder alignment workshops before kicking off programmes. Conflict is surfaced and resolved before execution.

Mid-market organisations skip this. They assume "of course we're aligned on what we're trying to achieve." The assumption is wrong.

## **The Impact:**

- **Rework and direction changes:** Leadership disagrees on priorities. The programme changes direction.
- **Resource conflicts:** One leader wants resources for speed. Another wants to cut them for cost control. Resources are pulled and reallocated.
- **Morale and execution:** Teams don't know what the real priority is. They work on what they think matters, then get told it's wrong.
- **Timeline and budget:** Either timeline slips or budget explodes (or both).

## **How to Avoid It:**

Conduct an explicit stakeholder alignment workshop before kick-off:

1. **Bring together key leaders:** CEO, CFO, COO, and other key stakeholders.
2. **Discuss trade-offs explicitly:** "Our timeline is 12 months, budget is £2M, and disruption needs to be minimal. Given these constraints, what's our priority ranking?" Force a conversation.
3. **Resolve conflicts:** If speed is the priority, acknowledge that cost will be higher. If cost is the priority, acknowledge that timeline will slip. Don't pretend you can have it all.
4. **Document the decision:** Get stakeholder sign-off on priorities and trade-offs.
5. **Revisit quarterly:** As the programme evolves, revisit whether priorities have changed.

A mid-market insurance organisation we worked with had conflicting stakeholder priorities. We ran a half-day alignment workshop with five senior leaders. They discovered they'd been optimising for different things. The conversation took 90 minutes. The result: clear priority ranking, explicit trade-offs, and agreement on what "success" meant.

Result: No mid-programme direction changes. Leadership was aligned, so the programme could execute without constant second-guessing.

## Mistake 5: Underestimating the Cost of Poor Change Management

### The Error:

A mid-market organisation implements new systems or processes. The technical deployment goes fine. The data migration works. Systems are live.

But six months later:

- User adoption is 40% below target
- Teams are workarounds around the system instead of using it
- Operational efficiency is 20% worse than planned
- The programme failed to deliver expected business benefits

The root cause: Poor change management. Users weren't prepared. Processes weren't aligned to the new system. Support wasn't available. Training was inadequate.

### Why This Happens in Mid-Market:

Enterprise organisations have dedicated change managers and comprehensive change management plans.

Mid-market organisations treat change management as "IT support" or "training." They provide technical support and a training course. They don't think about organisational readiness, process redesign, stakeholder communication, or sustained adoption.

### The Impact:

- **Benefit realisation fails:** The system is technically fine, but the organisation doesn't get the expected benefits.
- **Rework and support costs:** Support teams are overwhelmed. Rework is needed to fix processes that weren't designed for the new system.
- **User frustration:** Users feel abandoned. They resist the change. Adoption is low.
- **Programme fails despite technical success:** The system works. The programme failed to deliver value.

### How to Avoid It:

Treat change management as a core programme workstream, not an afterthought:

1. **Dedicated change manager:** Assign someone to own organisational readiness, not just training.
2. **Stakeholder communication plan:** Regular communication about why the change matters, what's changing, what users need to do differently.
3. **User readiness assessment:** Before go-live, assess whether users are ready. If not, delay and increase support.

4. **Process redesign:** Don't just implement the system. Redesign processes to take advantage of the system.
5. **Post-go-live support:** Don't disappear after launch. Maintain active support for 30-60 days. Monitor adoption. Address issues quickly.
6. **Benefit tracking:** Measure whether the organisation is achieving expected benefits. If adoption is low, find out why and fix it.

A mid-market manufacturing organisation implemented a new ERP system. Technical deployment was perfect. But adoption was 30%. We brought in change management: dedicated communication, process redesign, extended support.

Result: Adoption improved to 85% within 90 days. The organisation achieved 90% of expected benefits (up from 30%).

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### The Pattern: Governance Precedes Execution

These five mistakes have a common root: inadequate governance.

Mid-market organisations often think governance is bureaucracy. They try to be lean and agile. They skip formal structures.

But governance isn't bureaucracy. It's clarity:

- Clear decision rights (no unclear accountability)
- Clear scope boundaries (no scope creep)
- Clear accountability (one person owns outcomes)
- Clear stakeholder alignment (everyone knows priorities)
- Clear change management discipline (adoption isn't left to chance)

Governance enables speed. Without it, programmes slow down because decisions are unclear, scope expands, accountability is diffused, and stakeholders conflict.

With governance, programmes move fast because decisions are clear, scope is controlled, one person owns outcomes, and everyone knows what they're optimising for.

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### Conclusion

Mid-market programmes don't fail because the organisations lack capability. They fail because the governance structures aren't in place.

If your programme is showing signs of these mistakes, the fix isn't hiring more people or working harder. It's establishing clear governance.

This isn't complex. A one-page decision matrix. A simple change control process. Clear stakeholder alignment. A dedicated change manager. These aren't bureaucratic overhead. They're the foundation that allows your programme to deliver.

The organisations that succeed aren't smarter. They're structured.

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## Next Steps

If your programme is at risk, or if you see yourself in these mistakes, governance is where to start.

We work with organisations to:

- Diagnose governance gaps
- Establish clear decision-making structures
- Align stakeholders around explicit priorities
- Set up change management discipline
- Build accountability for outcomes

Book a free Discovery Call to review your specific situation.

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