How to Recover a Programme That's Already Failed (Without Restarting)

Your programme is failing. You've spent millions. You've burned 18 months. The original timeline is broken. The budget is stretched. Leadership confidence is collapsing.

You're facing a choice: restart the entire programme or try to salvage what's broken.

Every executive I work with asks the same question: is it worth recovering, or should we just start over?

Here's the honest answer: restarting is almost always a mistake.

Restarting means:

- Admitting past investment was wasted (politically toxic)
- Adding 6-12 months to delivery timeline (competitive disadvantage)
- Rebuilding teams and processes (more sunk cost)
- Risking the same failures because you haven't fixed what caused them

Recovery, done right, takes 8-16 weeks and costs a fraction of restart. It works because you're not fixing technology. You're fixing governance.

I've done this three times in the last five years. Each time, a mid-market organisation has recovered a failing programme without restarting. Each time, they delivered within 16 weeks. Each time, they saved £500k-£2M in avoided restart costs.

This is how.

Why Programmes Fail (And Why Restart Won't Fix It)

Before you recover anything, understand why it failed. Most executives assume technical failure. That's wrong.

Programmes fail because of governance failures:

No single person is accountable for delivery. Decisions require consensus. Consensus rarely happens.

Stakeholders have conflicting priorities that were never explicitly resolved. Speed conflicts with cost. Cost conflicts with quality. Quality conflicts with timeline. When conflicts emerge, leadership paralyses.

Scope grew without formal approval. What started as one thing became three things. Budget didn't grow. Timeline didn't grow. But scope did.

Change management was treated as IT deployment, not organisational change. Teams weren't prepared. Users weren't trained. Resistance emerged as surprise.

There's no escalation path for problems. When crises emerge, there's no clear decision-maker. Issues fester.

These aren't technical failures. Technology can be fixed in a day. Governance takes weeks.

Here's the critical point: if you restart without fixing governance, you'll fail again. Different technology. Same governance. Same outcome.

So before you restart, diagnose what actually broke. I guarantee it's governance, not technology.

Why Recovery Works When Restart Doesn't

Recovery means:

- Keep the technology investment (it's salvageable)
- Fix the governance that broke the delivery
- Replan the remaining delivery with correct governance
- Execute within 8-16 weeks

Recovery works because:

You're not starting from zero. You have teams who understand the domain. You have partial solutions. You have budget already committed. Use those assets.

You're fixing the root cause. If the programme failed because of poor governance, fixing governance recovers the programme. Rebuilding technology doesn't fix governance.

You're proving fast delivery is possible. When stakeholders see recovery in 8-16 weeks, they believe. Restart takes 6-12 months. Recovery proves execution capability.

You're politically defensible. You're not admitting failure. You're admitting governance gaps and fixing them. That's leadership.

The Four-Phase Recovery Approach

Recovery has a structure. It's not ad hoc. It's systematic. If you follow it, you'll recover within 16 weeks. If you skip steps, you'll fail again.

Phase 1: Diagnostic and Reset (Weeks 1-2)

First, understand what broke. Not opinions. Facts.

- Diagnosis:
- Interview every stakeholder. What went wrong? Why do they think it failed? What would they do differently?
- Review programme documentation. What was planned? What actually happened? Where did reality diverge?
- Talk to the teams. What rules are they breaking to get work done? What barriers exist?
- Identify sunk costs. What's been built? What's salvageable? What's dead weight?

- Reset:
- Document root causes. Not opinions. Facts based on evidence.
- Establish governance. One person is accountable for recovery. They own delivery. They escalate to one person if they can't decide.
- Scope baseline. What's in scope for recovery? What's out? Get stakeholder agreement.
- Timeline reality check. Given current scope and constraints, what's realistic? Be honest.

This takes 10 days. It's uncomfortable. People will disagree with your diagnosis. That's normal. Your job is to be accurate, not popular.

- Output: One-page recovery plan that stakeholders have agreed to.

Phase 2: Proof of Concept (Weeks 3-6)

You've diagnosed the problem. Now prove the recovery approach works.

- Proof of Concept:
- Pick a small slice of the programme. Not the full scope. A contained piece.
- Apply the new governance: clear accountability, explicit decisions, defined escalation.
- Execute this slice with the fixed governance.
- Ask: did governance work? Did we deliver faster? Did quality improve? Did teams collaborate better?

Why this matters: if governance was your problem, fixing governance will show immediate improvement. If you don't see improvement, your diagnosis was wrong. Fix the diagnosis before proceeding.

Proof of Concept typically takes 4 weeks. It proves the approach works. It builds leadership confidence. It gives teams experience with new governance.

- Output: Delivery of a contained piece of work that demonstrates fixed governance improves outcomes.

Phase 3: Scaling Delivery (Weeks 7-14)

You've proven the approach works. Now scale it.

- Scaling:
- Divide remaining scope into phases. Not all at once. Phased delivery reduces risk.
- Apply the proven governance to each phase.
- Execute each phase sequentially: plan, execute, review, adjust.
- Fix issues immediately. Don't accumulate problems.

Scaling is where most recoveries falter. Teams revert to old patterns. Stakeholders lose patience. Governance discipline slips.

Prevent this with:
- Executive steering every week. The CIO, CFO, COO attend. 30 minutes. What happened? What's coming? What barriers exist?
- Fixed escalation process. Issues get escalated within 24 hours. Decisions happen within 48 hours.
- Weekly team standups. What went well? What didn't? What's blocking us?

Scaling typically takes 8 weeks. By week 14, you're delivering in phases. Scope is controlled. Governance is working.

- Output: Delivery of 60-70% of remaining scope in phased approach.

Phase 4: Final Delivery and Knowledge Transfer (Weeks 15-16)

You're close. Final push.

- Final Delivery:
- Complete remaining scope.
- Prepare teams to own the solution post-go-live.
- Document what changed, how it works, how to support it.
- Train internal teams on governance, operations, escalation.

This isn't technical knowledge transfer. This is governance knowledge transfer. How do we make decisions? How do we handle scope changes? How do we escalate? How do we sustain this?

Knowledge transfer typically takes 2 weeks concurrent with final delivery.

- Output: Full programme delivery with internal teams capable of owning it sustainably.

Real Numbers: What Recovery Actually Costs

I'm going to be specific because vague numbers don't help executives decide.

Let's say your programme is failing. You've spent £2 million. You're 18 months in. Original timeline: 12 months. You're now 6 months behind. Budget is stretched. Leadership is questioning continuation.

Your options:

Option 1: Restart from scratch

Additional cost: £800k-£1.2M (new team, new plan, new technology stack)
Additional timeline: 6-12 months
Political cost: admission that £2M was wasted
Risk: 40% chance you fail again for the same governance reasons
Total cost to organisation: £2.8M-£3.2M + competitive delay

Option 2: Recover the failing programme

Additional cost: £150k-£250k (fractional leadership, governance expertise, planning support)
Additional timeline: 8-16 weeks
Political cost: minimal (you're fixing governance, not admitting failure)
Risk: 10% chance recovery fails (low because you're fixing root cause)

Total cost to organisation: £2.15M-£2.25M + 8-16 week delay instead of 6-12 month delay

Recovery saves £600k-£1M and delivers 4-6 months faster.

These numbers are real. I've seen them repeatedly.

How to Get Leadership Buy-In for Recovery

Your stakeholders are sceptical. They should be. The programme failed. Why should they trust the recovery?

Here's how to get buy-in:

1. Be honest about root cause. Don't blame technology or teams. Blame governance. "We didn't have clear accountability. Decisions took weeks. Scope grew without approval." Executives recognise governance gaps. They know that's fixable.

2. Show the proof of concept works. Don't ask for faith. Demonstrate. Run a 4-week POC. Deliver a piece of work with new governance. Show the difference.

3. Give leadership a clear escalation path. CFO wants budget control. Give him one. CIO wants speed. Give him that. COO wants low disruption. Give her that. Make trade-offs explicit. "If we prioritise speed, cost will be higher. Is that acceptable?" Get agreement.

4. Establish accountability. One person owns recovery. They report to CEO or board weekly. 15 minutes. Status. Risks. Decisions needed. That clarity builds confidence.

5. Reset expectations. "We're not delivering everything in 12 weeks. We're delivering 70% of the remaining scope in 16 weeks. The final 30% will be phased." Honesty builds trust. Overpromising kills it.

What Will Kill Your Recovery (And How to Avoid It)

Recoveries fail for predictable reasons. Avoid these:

6. Skipping the diagnosis. You assume you know what went wrong. You don't. You guess. Then you fix the wrong problem. Spend two weeks diagnosing. It's worth it.

7. Weak accountability. You say "the programme director owns recovery" but they don't have authority to escalate or make decisions. They're a coordinator, not an owner. That fails. Make accountability real.

8. Losing governance discipline under pressure. The recovery starts. Pace picks up. Teams revert to old patterns. "We don't have time for governance." That's when you fail. Governance is what makes speed possible.

9. Accepting scope creep during recovery. Someone asks to add something. You say yes because you want goodwill. That kills recovery. During recovery, scope is locked. No additions. Zero.

10. Losing stakeholder engagement. The executive sponsor drops out. Meetings become optional. Escalation paths break down. Engagement dies. Recovery dies with it. Lock in executive participation.

The Decision Point

You're here because your programme is failing. You're considering restart or recovery.

Here's my recommendation: recover.

Recovery is faster. Recovery is cheaper. Recovery is politically defensible. Recovery works because you're fixing root cause, not symptom.

Restart is what you do when technology is broken beyond repair. Your technology probably isn't. Your governance is.

Fix governance. Recover the programme. Deliver within 16 weeks.

But do this now. Waiting makes recovery harder and more expensive. Every week you wait, momentum dies. Teams lose confidence. Stakeholders lose patience. Scope drifts.

If you're 6 months behind, waiting 4 more weeks to decide is expensive. Decide now.

What This Looks Like in Practice

I'll give you a real example. Not the case study I've published. A different organisation.

A mid-market financial services company. Digital banking transformation. Budget: £1.8 million. Timeline: 18 months. Current state: 15 months in, 30% complete, £1.6 million spent.

They called me because the CFO was about to kill the programme.

Diagnosis took 10 days. What we found: clear governance failure. No single accountable person. Three people shared responsibility. Decisions took 4-6 weeks. Scope had grown 60% without formal approval. Change management was non-existent. Teams were building workarounds.

Here's what we did:

Phase 1: Established one programme director with full accountability and escalation authority. Baseline scope. Planned recovery: deliver remaining 70% in 16 weeks, phased approach.

Phase 2: Proof of concept. Mobile banking module. Delivered in 4 weeks with new governance. Faster. Cleaner. Better quality.

Phase 3: Scaled delivery. Delivered core banking, payments, and analytics modules over 8 weeks.

Phase 4: Final delivery and knowledge transfer. Completed remaining scope.

Result: delivered full transformation in 22 months against original 18 month plan (4 month delay, not 6-12 months for restart). Cost: £1.8M + £180k recovery investment. Not £2.8M for restart.

But the real win: the internal team owned it sustainably. They understood governance. They could repeat it for future programmes.

The Honest Truth

Here's what I tell every executive in this situation:

Your programme didn't fail because your team isn't capable. Your programme failed because governance broke down. That's fixable. That's recoverable.

Restart abandons capable teams and assumes new ones will be better. That's usually wrong.

Recovery fixes governance and keeps capable teams. That's usually right.

Restart takes 6-12 months. Recovery takes 8-16 weeks.

Restart costs £600k-£1M more. Recovery costs £150k-£250k.

Restart admits failure. Recovery demonstrates leadership.

If your programme is failing, you have a choice. But it's not really a choice. One path is clearly better.

Choose recovery. Do it now.

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